2017

Is That Online Review Fake News? How Sponsorship Disclosure Influences Reader Credibility

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IS THAT ONLINE REVIEW FAKE NEWS?
HOW SPONSORSHIP DISCLOSURE INFLUENCES READER CREDIBILITY

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

Mass Communications

College of Information and Communications

University of South Carolina

2017

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Dedication

Dedicated to the love of my life, Julie, for her love and support. This project was very challenging period, but you were always there when I needed you. Thank you, Julie

Acknowledgements

The origin of this study stretches back 30 years. My career as a journalist greatly influenced this project both in its scope and final analysis. For that, I thank the many, many editors and reporters I worked with at Forbes, The Wall Street Journal, Dallas Morning News, Denver Post and Cleveland Plain Dealer. These professionals taught me about journalism. Along the way, I also learned about life, namely the need for to put stories in context, to treat sources fairly, and to be transparent in my actions, and always express humility for others, especially those who are less fortunate.

I wish to offer a warm thanks and tribute to my adviser Dr. Robert McKeever, committee members - Dr. Carol Pardun, Dr. Bartosz Wojdynski and Tara Marie Mortensen. I would also like to acknowledge former College of Information and Communications Dean Charles Bierbauer and the many USC faculty members who spent countless hours with me explaining things I didn't understand. Thank you for your patience, kindness and support.

Finally, this project would not have been possible without the generous financial support of USC alumnus Ken Baldwin. I cannot thank him enough for his interest and support of explanatory journalism at USC. Ken, I will miss our pancake breakfasts at I-HOP.

Abstract

In a randomized between-subjects design, participants (N =595) were assigned one of three online reviews containing disclosure statements (no disclosure, no sponsor, sponsored) denoting whether the author of an online review was paid by an advertiser or whether the review was independent of ad sponsorship. Hayes and Preacher's bootstrapping procedure was used to test the indirect and direct effects of related to a hypothesized model examining the impact of review disclosure on perceived credibility and purchase intention. The impact of two covariates – involvement and media literacy – was assessed to see if these variables had a potential confounding impact on predicted outcomes. Findings show ad sponsored reviews had a significantly negative effect on perceived credibility and purchase intension. Readers trusted and were more likely to purchase the product when the review was not disclosed as advertising but instead was disclosed to be journalistic and independent in nature. The finding have implications for publishers wishing to perceptions about the credibility of non-sponsored news-editorial content.

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Introduction

The Internet is awash in fake content and misinformation (BBC Word Trending, 2016; Caruso, 1999; Luhn, 2008; Ward, 1997). Almost daily, readers struggle with the credibility of Internet content, a trend that has sparked public skepticism about all forms of news, commentary and information being disseminated in the media marketplace (Barthel, Mitchell & Holcomb, 2016; Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Ho, 2012; King, 2010; Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann; 2003). Research shows 62% of Americans now get their news from social media, but 98% of people say they distrust the Internet, fearing the information is outdated, self-promotional or inaccurate (Borden & Tew, 2007; Ho, 2012). About two in three U.S. adults (64%) say fabricated stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events (Barthel et al., 2016). Marketers have added to the confusion by disguising advertising as news, creating a new genre of sponsored content called “native content.” Native content resembles journalistic produced news stories, but native content’s intensions and ad sponsorship are not always disclosed to the reader. Instead, native content is represented as something it is not: journalism.

1.1 Project Focus

Previous studies indicate readers need help assessing whether news and information published on the Internet merits their attention or should

dismissed as spam. Establishing credibility with a reader hinges on the "believability of a medium, source or message" (Hovland et al.,1953; Kaye & Johnson, 2011, p. 238; Metzger, 2007). This project focuses on credibility as it relates to news editorial content produced by journalists. The study examines whether the disclosure that an online review is not ad sponsored influences readers' perceptions about the credibility of the journalist's message, namely the evaluation of the product under review.

The study is important for two reasons. The first reason relates to the fact that the once-distinct lines between journalistic editorial content and advertising have blurred markedly during the past decade. Native content, a form of advertising, is deliberately fashioned by advertisers to resemble news written by journalists. It can be blamed for confusing readers. Research shows readers often have trouble determining the difference between native content and journalistic-produced content (e.g. news, online reviews, blogs). "Unlike traditional print publishing, it may be harder to discern the differences between the two forms [advertising and journalism] in the online environment because material is often presented seamlessly, without clear distinctions between advertising and other information" (Metzger et al., 2003, p.295; Tate & Alexander, 1999).

Publishers are required under federal law to disclose the sponsorship of news and editorial content, but fail to comply with the law (Swant, 2016). Even when an advertising label is displayed, consumers often miss the sponsorship disclosure (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015; Lazauskas, 2015; Wojdynski &

Evans, 2016, 2017). The reason for this oversight may be packaging and placement of the disclosure. Sponsored content is deliberately fashioned to mimic journalistic content in terms of its substance, appearance and layout. The effectiveness of native content hinges on its ability to look like editorial content produced by journalists and independent freelancers (Schauster, Ferrucci, & Neill, 2016; Wojdynski, 2016). When readers find they are viewing advertising, they ignore the content. Advertisers have responded by disguising how they package sponsored content, producing articles that appear like they were written by journalists. This created confusion among readers who can't tell the difference. One solution to this problem might be to more clearly mark non-advertising content produced by journalists, pointing out that it is not sponsored by advertisers but is, in fact, created by independent journalists. Labeling content as non-sponsored could reassure readers that the information being provided has not been influenced by an advertiser and can therefore be trusted. This tactic could potentially help publishers boost credibility with readers and alleviate confusion in the media marketplace.

The content examined in this research involves online product reviews. Online reviews were selected because of their widespread popularity and also because of their susceptibility to fraud and misrepresentation. Ninety percent of online shoppers report they consult online reviews before making a purchase decision (Channel Advisor, 2011). Yet past studies show 15-25% of the published online reviews are fake news (Luca & Zervas, 2016), published either by web robots or by individuals who were paid to review a hotel they never

stayed at or a product they never purchased (Luca & Zervas, 2016; Lu, Chang, & Chang, 2014; Streitfeld, 2011, Zerbo, 2016). Marketers, seeing the popularity of reviews, offer individuals cash payments, gift cards and free merchandise in exchange for writing positive reviews about books, airfares, cruises, hotels and restaurants (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2013; Hu, Liu, & Sambamurthy, 2011; Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013; Streitfeld, 2012; Zerbo, 2016). In 2015, Amazon sued 1,000 companies, alleging they were responsible for bogus reviews appearing on the Amazon website (Wattles, 2015). TripAdvisor, facing allegations that millions of its reviews were fake, decided to replace its slogan, “Reviews you can trust,” with a new one, “Reviews from our Community” (Tuttle, 2012).

Online reviews are typically written by individuals wishing to share their views about electronics, restaurants, doctors, furniture, vacations and movies (Liu, 2006). A Nielsen poll (2009) of 25,000 consumers found that 70% of consumers trust reviews as much as personal recommendations from friends and family. The average website visitor assumes the reviewers conducting the evaluations are independent, are not paid, are not receiving free merchandise and are not working for the company being reviewed (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2013; Dellarocas, 2006; Hu et al., 2011; Luca & Zervas, 2016).

The erosion in reader credibility of editorial content is compounded by how how content is produced and distributed. During the past decade, there has been an exponential increase in the amount of content produced by freelance contributors. Online reviews are written by freelancers who rely on marketers for

compensation in the form of cash or free merchandise (Sprague & Wells, 2010; Sullivan, 2009). By compensating the reviewer, advertisers are sponsoring the review. Absent disclosure, readers are led to believe the review is an independent assessment rather than paid advertising (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014; Tate & Alexander, 1999; Wojdynski, 2016).

In the past, media consumers relied on the established reputation of the media source publishing the information (Metzger et al., 2003). Editorial content was created and published by journalists, who were required to adhere to professional standards regarding accuracy, source disclosure and conflicts of interest. Advertising content was clearly marked and separated from news and editorial content. In the Web 2.0 world, past editorial standards governing source disclosure and fact checking have been abandoned as publishers have turned to free, crowdsourced content to fill websites. Compounding the problem, Web-based information is delivered through multiple channels and it is "prone to alteration which is difficult to detect" (Tate & Alexander, 1999; King, 2010; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 1999; Metzger et al., 2003, p.295). Fraudulent websites are created mimicking legitimate media websites. Information from these websites is then shared by individuals and republished (Tate & Alexander, 1999; Johnson & Kaye, 1998). It is not surprising then that readers complain they have difficulty assessing the credibility of the information they consume (Borden & Tew, 2007; Ho, 2012; Sundar, 2008).

Scholars and media executives have suggested that greater transparency about the sources of Web content would be a step toward improving reader

credibility (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010; Tate & Alexander, 1999; Zhang, Liu, Sayogo, Picazo-Vela, & Luna-Reyes, 2016). It seems only logical that if publishers offered detailed information about the source and sponsorship of content, readers would have an easier time assessing credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2004; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010, p. 185; Tate &Alexander, 1999).

In the new media age, consumers must bear the responsibility for determining whether information is fact or fiction (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). Journalists are fewer in number today than 10 years ago. Meanwhile, there has been an explosion in content created and published by individuals not affiliated with traditional news organizations. On Twitter, more than 500,000 tweets are produced each day (http://www.internetlivestats.com/twitter-statistics/). The public has more content at its disposal. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of tools available to assess the accuracy and validity of information being published. Including a textual disclosure statement identifying content as not paid for by an advertiser, is one step publishers could take to help readers assess the true intention of the message creator. It is the expressed goal of this study to make a meaningful contribution to the debate about how to best improve reader trust and improve content credibility in the Web 2.0 world.

1.2 Navigating this Study

Chapter 2 reviews the relevant scholarship in the areas of trust, credibility, disclosure, purchase intention, and involvement. Chapter 3 discusses the method used to collect data on the subject under examination. Chapter 4 reports the study's findings. Chapter 5 discusses the results, the study's limitations and makes recommendations for further study

Chapter 2 Literature Review

This section reviews relevant literature and theoretical linkages related to this study. The study spans several fields of interest, most notably mass communication, psychology, marketing and advertising. The topic of advertising sponsorship has been studied by scholars, but not the impact of including a statement denoting a lack of advertising sponsorship. This is a new topic worthy of examination given readers' skepticism about information sources in the Internet age and the need for publishers to improve perceptions regarding the credibility of their news products.

2.1 News & Native Content

The conceptual definitions of news, sponsored content and native content are worthy of explication. Sponsored content and native content are used interchangeably by advertising professionals. It is worth noting that there are key differences between the two terms. Sponsored content informs individuals about a brand and it aims to create awareness. Native advertising, however, is designed to convince or persuade readers in hope of changing their attitudes (Lazauskas, 2016). Native is avant-garde while sponsored content, native's stodgy cousin, has been around for much of the past century. Native is fresh and comes in many content forms. Native is much more effective at capturing readers' attention than traditional display advertising since readers equate the

content as journalism, not advertising (Schauster, Ferrucci & Neill, 2016; Wojdynski, 2016).

This research is applicable to creators of both sponsored content and native content, but its main mission is to offers insights into how publishers could alleviate confusion and improve credibility of news content. The study tests credibility as it relates to the inclusion of a statement informing readers that the content was “sponsored” in the context of an online review. This research also tests the effect of labeling the content as “not-sponsored” by an advertiser. As the lines between news editorial content have blurred, it would seem imperative that publishers develop better ways of labeling content thereby establishing reader trust or risk a further erosion of their core news product. (Lazauskas, 2015).

It is important to note that the definition of news is evolving, too, in part due to changes in the advertising environment already discussed (i.e. native content). Simply put, the distinction between advertising and news has blurred. News is broadly defined as something that is relevant, useful and of interest to a given audience (Brooks, Moen, Kennedy, & Ranly, 2013) while advertising is persuasive communication. Traditionally, news was collected and distributed by journalists who were prohibited from expressing their opinions. Opinion was reserved for the editorial page. With the emergence of social media networks, the definition of news has been broadened and now includes the work of citizen advocates, content produced by bloggers and individuals acting as product reviewers. Facebook refers to posts as “stories,” and a collection of stories is

considered a “news feed,” even though the information involves little more than a personal narrative or individual comments, not traditional journalism based ooriginal reporting. The accuracy of the news and other information published on the Web seems to matter less than the “perceived enjoyability, liveliness, important, timeliness and relevance” of the news and information being shared by readers (Sundar, 1998, p.64). Content sharing occurs irrespective of source attribution, “raising significant concerns for publishers committed to serious journalistic practice on the Internet” (p. 64).

2.2 Online Reviews

It is also worthwhile to define the term online review as it relates to this research. Online reviews are single-source personal narratives that provide individuals with relevant information about a product or service. The reviews are published on multiple platforms. Many individuals create videos reviewing products and publish the videos on YouTube. Traditional news websites (e.g. The New York Times, Washington Post) publish reviews written by paid staff writers on topics ranging from vacations to new cars. Specialized websites (e.g. cooking, technology, travel) offer reviews written by individuals professing expertise in a given subject. Finally, e-commerce websites display reviews written by past shoppers in hope of stimulating future sales. Readers have difficulty determining whether the published online review is journalism, advertising or fake news. Unfortunately, sources are not uniformly disclosed by publishers and it is difficult to determine what editorial standards – if any – were

imposed on the author of the review. “Absent such controls, information assessment and verification – core components of source, message and medium credibility – now often become the responsibility of the media consumer” (Metzger et al., 2003, p.27; Westerman, Spence & van Der Heider, 2014).

2.3 Theoretical basis

The central variable being tested in this study is credibility and whether it mediates a buyer’s intention to purchase a product evaluated by an online reviewer. Online reviews contain both a source (author) and a message component. If users see a source as credible, they trust it (Jackob, 2010; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Credibility is key to a message’s acceptance since readers dismiss sources that they do not consider credible (Gaziano, 1988; Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2000, 2011). Credibility is subcomponent of trust, which is much broader construct, and is discussed in a later section of this literature review.

When assessing the credibility of a message, readers rely on multiple factors. Credibility is conceptualized in terms of source, message and media (Metzger et al., 2003). Literally, dozens of constructs have been used to define credibility: fairness, accuracy, objectivity, trust, believability and reliability (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2007; Self, 1996). Past research examines credibility of editorial content by focusing on a wide range of topics: media brand, message medium, message content, message source and the impact of technology (see Brewin, 2013; Cassidy, 2007; Carr, Barnidge, Lee, & Tsang, 2014; Chung, Nam,

& Stefanone, 2012; Cole & Greer, 2013; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Metzger, Flanagin & Meddlers, 2010; Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus & Mccann, 2003; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Nah & Chung, 2012; Sternadori & Thorson, 2009; Sundar 1999, 2008; Wulfemeyer, 1983). Attempts to measure the credibility of the media content have been hobbled by a lack of cohesion among academic researchers when it comes to deciding both the definition of credibility and how to best measure it (Appelman & Sundar, 2015). And despite decades of research, there is not a theory of credibility or agreed upon model that scholars use to test the concept of crediblity.

Credibility's roots trace back to Aristotle, who held that the effectiveness of a message was influenced by the expertise and trust of the messenger, the emotional appeal of the message and the force of evidence and logic contained in the message. Academic scholars have been studying credibility for more than 60 years, starting with the pioneering work of psychologist Carl Hovland and his colleagues at Yale University who developed a theoretical structure linking individual attributes and persuasion to three major factors: source, message content, and audience. Hovland, Janis & Kelley (1953) found that individuals assess a message based on their perceptions of the communicator's motivation to tell the truth. Gaziano and McGrath (1986) note that interest in measuring the credibility of media sources didn't become popular until the 1960s, when researchers became intrigued with measuring whether TV or newspapers were more believable when it came to local news. Hovland distilled source credibility into two subcomponents – trustworthiness and expertise. Researchers tested a

number of other credibility components, including fairness, accuracy, knowledgeability and completeness, only to conclude that credibility was a multidimensional concept, “although the dimensions varied from study to study” (Gaziano & McGrath, p. 452; Meyer, 1974). When the Internet emerged in the 1990s, researchers took a new interest in the subject. Sundar (1998) examined online news source attribution and reader perceptions about quotations. News stories containing quotes were found to be significantly more credible than stories not containing quotations (Sundar, 1998). One practical implication of Sundar’s study is that poorly sourced stories published on the Internet are evaluated as being less credible (p. 63). What journalists typically add to a news story is additional factual information collected from reporting, including personal interviews. By comparison, online reviews rarely contain quotations, but are instead first-person narratives written by a single person expressing their views on a product or service. Since reviews carry the perception they are written by an individual, readers generally assign the same level of importance to what the reviewer recommends as to word-of-mouth recommendations offered by friends and family (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Filieri, 2016; Dou et al., 2012). The information provided by the reviewer is considered credible provided readers believe the reviewer is trustworthy and has the necessary expertise to evaluate the product or service under review (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; McGinnies & Ward, 1980).

This research attempts to build on past work of Appelman & Sundar (2016), which theorized that message credibility is influenced by the believability,

authenticity and accuracy of the message being conveyed by the source. This study uses a scale developed by Appelman & Sundar (2016) that was specifically constructed to treat message credibility as a distinct concept that differs from source credibility and medium credibility (p. 74). “The scale is not only reliable and valid, but it is also parsimonious and theory driven” (p.73). Appelman and Sundar (2016) assert that past studies attempting to measure credibility of crowdsourced information appearing on social media websites have focused on the perceived credibility of the information (Cunningham & Bright, 2012; Edwards, Spence, Gentile, Edwards & Edwards, 2013; Hwang, 2013; Park, Xiang, Josiam & Kim, 2014) or the perceived credibility of the social media website (Lee & Ahn, 2013) rather than examining the credibility of the content published on the social media website (Appelman & Sundar, 2016, p. 60) “Disambiguating message credibility from source credibility and medium credibility can enhance the clarity and quality of research in a number of theoretical and practical domains” (Appelman & Sundar, 2016, p. 60).

2.4 Message source

When assessing the source of the message, credibility is examined based on the user’s perceptions of trustworthiness and expertise of the source of the message (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). “If the attributed source of a piece of information is a credible person or organization, then according to conventional wisdom, that information is probably reliable” (Sundar, 2008, p. 73). Newhagen and Nass (1989) note that ambiguity exists regarding the term “source” (Sundar,

1998, p. 56). In communications research, scholars view the term “source” from the vantage point of media channels.

Other researchers have studied source as it applies to the publisher of the information. The mainstream media have historically functioned as gatekeepers of information (Abel & Wirth, 1977; Carter & Greenberg; 1965; Sundar, 1998) but that role has shifted with the emergence of crowdsourced information produced by individuals. It is not uncommon for one individual to create content based on personal opinions or experiences and then publish this account on Facebook, Twitter or another social media website (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010; Metzger et al., 2003). Unlike a journalistic article, the source and author of what appears on social media are often one and the same. For example, a Yelp review is based on one person’s evaluation of one meal at a restaurant. The information or credibility of the source is not checked by Yelp or the restaurant before it is published (Tatge & Luchsinger, 2016). The role of the journalist is quite different. Journalists collect and pass along useful, accurate, fact-checked information obtained elsewhere (Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2004; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Sundar, 1998). Journalists avoid entanglements that would make them an active part of the story since they view their role as one that requires they remain impartial and objective (Kovach & Rosensteil, 2007). Becoming a source of the information used to prepare a story is something journalists see as a conflict that compromises the integrity, and possibly even the credibility, of the information being conveyed to readers.

In the case of online reviews, information provided by a product reviewer is assessed by readers for how its correlates with readers' existing attitudes about the product the reviewer is evaluating. Information integration theory holds that development of personal impressions and attitudes involves the integration of information "into evaluative judgements that have social relevance" (Anderson, 1971, p. 173). Source status, reliability of the source, and expertise are all weighed by individuals attempting to decide the credibility of the information contained in an online review or even a news story. How much weight is given to the information source depends on past experiences with the source, ego involvement and the strength of their prior convictions about the subject. Whether the views expressed by an online reviewer are adopted largely depends on whether that information conforms to the shoppers' individual attitudes and beliefs (Anderson, 1981; Sherif & Hovland, 1961).

2.5 Message content

When assessing message credibility, consumers rely on content characteristics such as tone, word usage and length (Walther, 1996). Metzger et al. (2003) note that past research examining message credibility has focused on source and message structure (Hong, 2006; Sharp & McClung, 1996) message content (Bacon, 1979; Hamilton, 1998; McCroskey, 1969) and message intensity (Bradac, Bowers, & Courtright, 1980; Hamilton, 1998; Hamilton & Hunter, 1998). Unorganized messages and messages containing low-quality information and messages using more opinionated language are viewed as less credible (Metzger et al., 2003, p. 27). Slater & Rouner (1996) note that "although source

credibility is supposed to influence perceptions about the message, in fact, messages also influence perceptions concerning the credibility of the source" (p. 975).

One example of how message content influences source credibility is native content fashioned to resemble news. Native advertising's effectiveness hinges on it being disguised as news/editorial content, resembling an article written by a journalist. When readers realize news/editorial content is, in fact, advertising, research shows they reject the content's message. Amazeen & Muddiman (2017) note that the emergence of native content has had a deleterious effect on credibility of legacy news publishers and online news websites. "Native advertising potentially deceives audiences who are unaware that native advertising is paid, persuasive content versus editorial, thus contributing to the diminishing credibility of journalism" (Schauster, Ferrucci, & Neill, 2016, p. 1408).

2.6 Message medium

Message source is sometimes confused with message medium, or how the information is published and distributed. Message source, in the case of this research, should be interpreted to mean message creator. Of course, who creates the message and who delivers it are sometimes one and the same (e.g. public speech, a blog, email or text message). Message delivery influences how the information is interpreted and processed by the viewer (Cantril & Allport, 1935; Haugh, 1952; Knower, 1935; Wilke, 1934). Past research shows printed text requires readers to think more about the content while audio and video force

the viewer to focus more on the likeability and trustworthiness of the source while paying less attention to the message contents (Booth-Butterfield & Gutowski, 1993). In the case of Web editorial content, several types of media converge – text, video, graphics, audio. Overall, the credibility of online media remains mixed. Flanagin and Metzger (2000) found newspapers were more credible than "other media channels regardless of news content," but other studies (Johnson & Kaye, 1998) found there is no "significant relationship between Internet experience and relative credibility of the Internet" when compared to other media (Jo, 2005). As Web editorial content has become more pervasive, studies show readers find articles appearing on the Web are just as credible as those appearing in a printed newspaper. Web content credibility is influenced by content type, presentation, information literacy, pre-existing attitudes and reader expectations (Carr, Barnidge, Lee, & Tang, 2014; Flanagin & Metzger, 2000, 2007; Metzger, 2007).

For much of the past century, a media message was distributed in one of two ways: printed word or over the airwaves. Mainstream media outlets functioned as gatekeepers of information (Lewin, 1947). Sources of information were rigorously researched, analyzed and validated prior to publication by mainstream media (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Metzger et al., 2003). Journalists could only include viewpoints if the opinion was attached to a source quoted in the story (Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Content was created and distributed by a handful of monolithic media companies (e.g. The

New York Times, CBS News, Gannett, Knight Ridder) which exerted influence over what was published and reader perceptions. In the case of journalism, content was published in accordance with professional standards imposed by media brands (Gade & Lowrey, 2011; King, 2010, p. 211-250; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Information originating from news organizations was considered relatively credible given editorial procedures and fact checking procedures (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007, p. 321).

2.7 Trust

Trust is the confidence a person has that other people will act favorably and as anticipated (Gefen, 2000, p. 726). Trust is acquired over time and is based on previous interactions with a party. If a party behaves as expected, then that increases trust (p. 726), allowing individuals to reduce uncertainty. Trust deals with “beliefs about future actions of other people” (p. 727). Trust is multidimensional and a critical factor to consider when measuring attitudes and behavior. Communications scholars view trust it as a subcomponent of credibility. Online reviews influence consumer attitudes by building trust and by offering knowledge on a given topic (Gefen, 2000, p. 733; Racherla & Fiske, 2012). One way to assess trust is to see if it leads to an action or a measurable change in individual attitudes. Senecal and Nantel (2004) found that consumers who sought online product recommendations were twice as likely to purchase the recommended product than someone who didn’t consult the review (Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013; Robson, Farshid, Bredican, & Humphrey, 2013, p. 2 ; Zhang et al., 2010).

Prior research has found consumers view user-generated reviews as being more trustworthy than traditional advertisements, a factor that influences adoption and purchase behavior (Huang et al., 2007; Wang & Benbast, 2005. Readers consider online reviews to be independently written since the content is represented as being created by individuals (Hu, Bose, Koh, & Liu, 2011; Luca & Zervas, 2016; Lim & van Der Heide, 2015; Scott, 2014; FTC, 2011). Because consumers are promoted as the source, the online review is interpreted without defensive processing techniques that individuals generally engage in when they encounter persuasive messages (Quick, Shen, & Dillard, 2012). Aware of this fact, marketers post promotional reviews to influence consumer decision-making (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Racherla & Fiske, 2012, p. 549).

Even though consumers admit regularly consulting online reviews, the trustworthiness of reviews has come into question. Roughly half Americans (51%) who read online reviews say they generally give an accurate picture of a company, but "a similar share (48%) believes it is often hard to tell if online reviews are truthful and unbiased" (Smith & Anderson, 2016). Online reviews are viewed by shoppers as honest evaluations of both the strength and weaknesses of products (Park, Lee, & Han, 2007, p. 127) but empirical research shows information contained in online reviews is a mix of fact, fiction and advertising (Associated Press, 2015; Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2013; King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014; Lim & van Der Heide, 2015; Luca & Zervas, 2016; Scott, 2014). E-commerce websites typically do not check the factual accuracy of published review (Tatge & McKeever, 2016). Authors are sometimes hired by companies to

pose as real customers and write positive reviews about products or negative reviews about competitors (Streitfeld, 2011, 2012). A Harvard Business Review study found that 16% of the reviews appearing on Yelp.com are fraudulent (Luca & Zervas, 2016). Distinguishing real consumer opinions from fake reviews is next to impossible (Dellarocas, 2006; Dou, Walden, Lee, & Lee, 2012; Hu et al., 2011; Racherla & Fiske, 2012).

Determining what information can be trusted has become challenging. In the past, the public relied upon journalists to sift through information, evaluate its accuracy and decide whether it merited publication (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Lewin, 1947). In the new media environment, individuals are acting as their own gatekeepers. The role of professional media to check content and determine source credibility has been greatly diminished (Coddington & Holton, 2014; Westerman, Spence and van Der Heider, 2014, p. 172). Today, individuals create text and capture video and photos using mobile cellular phones. Many individuals pass online information along, including product recommendations, preferring to redistribute existing content published elsewhere rather than taking the energy to create original content (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, Shearer, 2016; Singer, 2014; Thurman, 2008, 2011).

Formally stated, the following hypotheses were posed:

H1: Participants who are shown a product review that includes a disclosure statement that says the review *was not* sponsored will perceive the product review as being more credible when compared to participants

shown a product review that includes a disclosure statement that says the review *was* sponsored.

This study also posed the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the relationship between a disclosure statement (no disclosure, no sponsor or sponsored) and credibility*?*

RQ2: What is the relationship between disclosure statements (no disclosure, no sponsor or sponsored) and trust?

2.8 Disclosure

Most the past scholarship regarding disclosure draws from the literature in the field of advertising, not journalism. There is an obvious reason for this fact: News organizations face no regulations regarding source disclosure. The editorial decision about whether to disclose the source of a news article, feature story or opinion column is left up to the news organization. As a general rule, articles produced by journalists are not labeled in the same way that is true in other industries (e.g. food, drug, cosmetics). One exception is entertainment products, which display the Motion Picture Association of America's film rating system. Another exception is advertising media. Federal rules require that persuasive communication be distinctively marked so it is not confused with other forms of communication.

Media's disclosure practices differ markedly from many other industries, which label products to inform consumers about ingredients, manufacturing practices, additives and potential hazards. Some labels provide clear warnings

such as those contained on tobacco and pharmaceutical products. Other labels are more informational in nature such as those contained on food and personal care products (Konar & Cohen, 1997; Label Insight, 2016; Russell, Swasy, Russell, & Engel, 2017).

Labeling and source disclosure of Web editorial content (text, graphics, photos, video) is inconsistent. It lacks transparency, suffers from inaccuracies and is sometimes fiction (Gade & Lowrey, 2011; Hwang & Jeong, 2016; Kang, 2010; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010; Metzger et al., 2003). Federal rules governing commercial speech state that sponsored editorial content must be clearly marked as advertising otherwise the message is considered deceptive communication (FTC, 2009). In today's contemporary media environment advertising is tailored to resemble news and positioned to mask its true intention, namely to persuade readers (Metzger et al. 2003; Keib & Tatge, 2016; Sundar, 1998).

This study tests the impact of informing readers that the author did not receive compensation from advertiser. Source disclosure allows readers to assess credibility and builds trust (Hovland & Weiss, 1951, Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010; McCroskey & Young, 1981; Reich, 2011). Yet, scholarly research indicates there is a lack of transparency regarding information sources in the Internet world (Luhn, 2008; Lim & Van Der Heide, 2015; Metzger et al., 2003; Shaw, 1998; Sundar, 1998). Disclosure of content as paid advertising influences readers' perceptions about content's credibility, causing viewers to scrutinize the message more closely (Boerman, van Reijmersdal & Neijens, 2012, 2013; Wei, Fischer, & Main, 2008, Campbell, Mohr, & Verlegh, 2013; Friestad & Wright, 1994).

Readers also view sponsored content as less credible than non-advertising sponsored content (Boerman, van Reijmersdal & Neijens, 2015; Kim, Pasadeos & Barban, 2001; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016; Wu et al., 2016). What is not known is whether disclosing an online review as not being sponsored has a similar, reverse effect on credibility, namely it increases reader's trust in the message being conveyed.

Previous studies have paid scant attention to whether readers are told about a potential conflict raised by advertisers paying freelancers to write favorable online reviews. Freelancers are required to disclose receiving free merchandise and payments from advertisers, but this financial arrangement is not always shared with readers (Boerman et al., 2013; Carlson, 2015; Sahni & Nair, 2016).

Disclosure of details about the writer of article is an important factor evaluated by readers in assessing the credibility of blogs, social media posts and online reviews. Consumers give more weight to reviewers who they feel are genuine and "have social backgrounds, tastes and preferences" similar to their own background (Racherla & Friske, 2012, p. 550). Maddux and Rogers (1980) found that disclosure of personal information such as gender and geographical origin enhances the credibility of the message. Online reviews containing a name, photo and other biographical information (hometown, interests, friends) boost the credibility of the review, making it more useful in the eyes of the reader (Sussman & Siegal, 2003; Fogg et al., 2001). Online reviews that are perceived to be written by celebrities or persons with greater expertise carry greater

influence with shoppers since they reduce uncertainly (Bae & Lee, 2011; Robinson, Goh, & Zhang, 2012; West & Broniarczyk, 1998).

Publishers need to do a better job of informing readers that the news content they are consuming has not been influenced by advertisers (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015) or the publishers will suffer a potential reader backlash (Campbell et al., 2013; Friestad & Wright, 1994). Lazauskas, 2015; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016, 2017). One study found that 67% of readers felt deceived after learning an article was sponsored by a brand and 59% perceived news sites with sponsored content as less credible. (Lazauskas, 2014; Schauster, Ferrucci, & Neill, 2016). Four in 10 U.S. consumers report they felt disappointed or deceived when they learned that content they viewed was sponsored by an advertiser (Overmyer, 2015). Advertisers will more than likely resist increasing disclosure since they want sponsored content to be viewed just as credible as journalism content even though it is persuasive communication (Schauster, Ferrucci & Neill, 2016; Wojdynski, 2016).

Labeling proponents argue, however, that accurately labeling content as journalism or paid advertising might reduce confusion and increase the credibility of non-advertising content (e.g. news). By increasing the transparency of the source of the content, readers can accurately assess the nature of the content (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010, Nelson, Wood & Paek, 2009). Kovach & Rosenstiel (2007) assert that clear and detailed identification of sources is the most effective form of transparency. The more information disclosed about the writer of a product reviewer, the greater the likelihood the reader will trust the writer's

assessment even if the conclusions are incorrect (McGinnies & Ward, 1980; Walden, Bortree, & DiStaso, 2015).

Wojdynski and Evans (2016) assert that a disclosure statement should convey whether the message has been paid for by an advertiser and whether the message differs from other content published in the same venue. However, as previously discussed, that is not always the case. This study adopts one variable (disclosure) from Wojdynski et al. (2017) to assess the impact of disclosure statements on credibility: sponsor clarity, disclosure and deception. The variables from Wojdynski et al. (2017) offer the basis for this study's third research question (RQ3). The following research questions is offered:

RQ3: What is the relationship between disclosure statements (no disclosure, no sponsor or sponsored) and disclosure?

2.9 Purchase intention

This research examines whether the perceived credibility of an online review containing a disclosure statement mediates a shopper's intention to purchase the item evaluated by the reviewer. Previous research shows that online reviews are influential with consumers by building trust, reducing uncertainty and mitigating risk related to purchasing decisions (Ba & Pavlou, 2002; Dou et al., 2012; Hamby, Daniloski, & Brinberg, 2014; Pavlou & Gefen, 2004; Lim & van Der Heide, 2015; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013; Racherla & Fiske, 2012; Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Tatge & McKeever, 2016; Wang & Benbast, 2005). Readers trust the information contained in the reviews as much as recommendations offered by friends and family (Anderson, 2014; Channel

Advisor, 2011) and reviews are viewed as more trustworthy than traditional advertising (Huang, Chou, & Lan, 2007; Reitsma, 2010; Schlosser, 2011).

Nearly half of Americans (46%) who use social media said they are influenced either “a great deal or a fair amount” by reviews about companies, brands or products written by friends or family they follow on social networking sites. Individuals and bloggers who publish evaluations of products have a strong influence on readers (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Consumers rely on reviews to speed decision making, which explains why reviews have a significant impact on consumer choice. Yet, only a handful of studies have been conducted regarding the impact disclosure of advertiser sponsorship on purchasing decisions (see Campbell, Mohr & Verlegh, 2013; Liljander, Gummerus, & Söderlund, 2015; Lu, Chang, & Chang, 2014; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). There are no known studies examining the impact on purchasing intention of including a disclosure statement stating editorial content (e.g. online review) is not sponsored by an advertiser.

Adoption of a online review is commensurate with purchasing intention. Before readers adopt a reviewer’s recommendations, the reader must have confidence that the evaluation offers accurate information in an honest manner and that the source who wrote the review has necessary expertise to make correct assertions about the product or service they are reviewing (Hovland et al., 1953; McCroskey & Young, 1981; Lim & van der Heide, 2015; Giffin, 1967; Ohanian, 1991; Dou et al., 2012). Review adoption is affected by whether a consumer believes a message enhances the value of the communication and

whether they find it credible (Eisend, 2006; Wang & Benbast, 2005). Adoption of a review may result in a consumer purchasing an item, or integrating information into the shopper's attitudes and beliefs (Anderson, 1981). Before making a decision, a consumer evaluates the review to see if it conforms with existing beliefs and attitudes (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). Ultimately, adoption is linked to perceptions of the review's completeness, credibility, narrative, timeliness, accuracy, relevance, clarity and logic (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008; Hong & Park, 2012; Park & Kim, 2009).

Scholars concede that online reviews influence behavior, but there also is no consensus regarding why consumers adopt certain reviews, how consumers process information contained in a review or even what constitutes a useful or credible review from a consumer's perspective (see Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas, Awad, & Zhang, 2005; Li, Huang,Tan, & Wei, 2013; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010; Purnawirawan, De Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2012; Schlosser, 2011; Sen & Lerman, 2007; Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner & De Ridder, 2011; Zhang, Craciun, & Shin, 2010). Scholars have applied the theory of reasoned action to explain how online reviews influence purchasing behavior (Fishbein & Azjen, 1975, Ajzen, 2012; Tatge & McKeever, 2016). TRA and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991) assert that attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control are central to understanding an individual's behavioral intention (Madden, Ellen & Ajzen, 1992, p. 4). "Attitude mediates between belief and intention, although belief can also have a direct effect on intention" (Corbitt, Thanasankit & Yi, 2003, p. 205. Conversely, "negative

attitudes toward perceived risk can have a negative effect on a customer's trust intention and trust intention may positively influence participation behavior" (p. 205). E-commerce companies publish online reviews with the idea that the information offered by reviewers is credible information that will be read and acted upon by customers seeking to buy goods and services (McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002).

Beliefs and consumer attitudes also come into play when consumers process review information and decide what importance to assign to the information contained in the review (Lu, Chang & Chang, 2014). Research shows opinionated statements offering negative information have a greater influence on attitudes if the message receiver holds a neutral attitude about the topic (Mehrley & McCroskey, 1970, p.51). By comparison, neutral statements have a greater favorable attitude change on readers who hold a strong attitude toward the topic (p.51). Prior beliefs and experiences also play a powerful role in shaping attitudes about source credibility (Slater & Rouner, 1996), and ultimately, whether the consumer acts on recommendations favoring purchase or rejection of a product.

Based on past literature, this study plans to examine the following hypotheses (see Figure 1):

> **H2**: Participants viewing the review carrying no sponsor will have higher levels of purchase intentions relative to those viewing the sponsored review.

H3: Perceived credibility will be positively associated with greater intentions to purchase the reviewed product.

H4: Perceived credibility will mediate the relationship between the review sponsorship type (sponsored, no sponsor or no disclosure) and purchase intention.

Additionally, this research wishes to explore the following research questions:

RQ4: What is the relationship between disclosure statements (no disclosure, no sponsor or sponsored) and purchase intention?

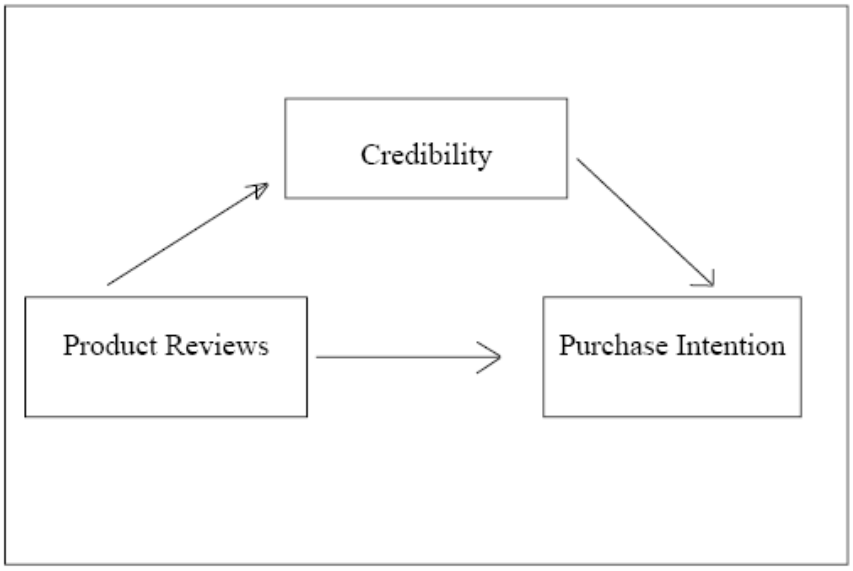

Figure 2.1 Hypothesized Model

2.10 Involvement

Involvement theory has received considerable attention in behavioral and advertising research where scholars are attempting to explain how involvement

may moderate the relationship between different variables (Huang, Chou, Lin, 2009). In this study, involvement is viewed as a potential moderating or confounding factor regarding whether online product reviews are perceived as credible when they contain a statement noting the review was not sponsored by an advertiser. The study also examines whether involvement moderates credibility and an individual's intention to purchase the item evaluated in an editorial product review written by a journalist when the review contains a disclosure stating it was not paid for by an advertiser.

What has been learned about involvement in the fields of psychology and advertising may provide insights into understanding the moderating effects of involvement on the credibility of news editorial content. Past research holds that the level of an individual's involvement in a product influences their attitudes and purchasing behavior regarding a product (Petty, Cacioppo, Schumann, 1983; Engel & Blackwell, 1982; Krugman, 1965; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Sherif & Hovland, 1961).

Three major research streams exist regarding involvement and they date from the 1970s through the 1990s. The work of Blech and Blech (1997), Dhokakia (1998) and Poiesz and Cees (1995) point to the role involvement plays in moderating relationships between variables (Huang et al., p. 515). Zaichkowsky (1986) put involvement in three different buckets: product involvement, ad involvement and purchase involvement. In the 1990s, Andrews postulated that involvement was comprised of three different properties: intensity,

direct and persistence (Huang et al, p. 515). Huang et. al (2009) notes that most research examining involvement employ one of the three theories mentioned in this paragraph. Scholars differ on whether advertising recall or consumer attitudes has a larger impact on purchasing behavior (see Steward & Furse 1986, Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1990; Bush, Smith & Martin 1999). Consumer attitudes influence purchasing intention, but advertising encourages an individual to purchase a product. Whether a person acts depends on involvement or interest in the product (Howard & Jagdish, 1969; Hupfer & Gardner, 1971 Zaichkowsky, 1985). The relevance or importance of making a purchase relates to purchase-decision involvement.

Advertising Involvement. Involvement focuses on attention, acquisition and the degree of retention of a persuasive message (Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984). The message must also be relevant to the receiver of the message who will then be motivated to respond to the ad (Taylor & Thompson, 1982). Involvement generally refers to a "mediating variable in determining if the advertising is effectively relevant to the consumer" (Zaichkowsky, 1985, p. 4). Involvement also refers to the relationship between the person and the product (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Product involvement research focuses on how relevant or important the person perceives the product category (Howard & Jagdish, 1969; Hupfer & Gardner, 1971; Zaichkowsky, 1985). Involvement has also been studied as it relates to the act of the making a purchase (Clark & Belk, 1978). In the context of studying persuasive messages, social and consumer psychology researchers generally agree that a high involvement message has a high degree

of personal relevance while a lower involvement message is considered trivial (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Sherif & Hovland (1961, p.167) argue that a high involvement message has “intrinsic importance” or “personal meaning” (Sherif et al. 1973, p. 311). Krugman (1965, p. 355) defines involvement as the number of “personal references” or connections a message recipient views as relevant to their life (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). “Informational advertising appears to be more effective for highly differentiated products” (Zaichkowsky, 1985, p. 12; Preston, 1970).

Petty & Cacioppo (1981) found that involvement moderates the effects of a persuasive message. A persuasive message that captures a high level of involvement has greater personal relevance and will elicit more personal connections than low involvement messages (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983; Engel & Blackwell, 1982; Krugman, 1965; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Sherif & Hovland, 1961). When subjects are highly interested or involved in the content (in this case a product review), the greater the persuasive effects (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). In high involvement situations, consumers engage in higher levels of scrutiny of the content of the message but pay less attention to other non-message cues such as source credibility or attractiveness of the source (Kim et al., 2001; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). The converse is true in low-involvement situations where individuals pay less attention to the content of the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Craik and Lockhart (1972) note that the extent or depth to which an incoming persuasive message is processed and remembered by an individual depends on the durability of the message. Explained another

way, messages that require greater levels of cognitive activity have a more durable impact on memory (Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984, p. 584).

Zaichkowsky (1985) notes the factors that precede advertising involvement fall into three factors: a person's experiences and values, the physical characteristics of the stimulus and the external environment surrounding the situation (e.g. being in the market to buy a new car versus not being ready to buy a car). (p. 5) "Where strong personal involvement already exists, the arguments must contain good quality statements to suppress counter-arguments and convince the receiver" (p. 6).

Product Involvement. The level of a consumer's involvement can moderate purchasing intentions. A product class may be important to a consumer or they may be ambivalent to the product being evaluated in an online review. "Product involvement is viewed as a precursor to purchase-decision involvement, but not necessarily a determinant of the willingness of the consumer to purchase the product (Mittal, 1989). Involvement also leads a consumer to search for more information in hope of making the right selection (Clarke & Belk, 1978; Zaichkowsky, 1985). How consumers go about reaching a decision is proportional to the complexity of the decision, meaning complexity increases involvement (Houston & Rothschild, 1977). When studying product involvement, two factors are consistently examined to assess whether a product is high or low involving: personal importance or personal relevance and differentiation of alternatives (Zaichkowsky, 1985, p. 9). Personal relevance relates to an

individual needs and values while differentiation of alternatives considers to what extent the individual will be “motivated to compare and evaluate” difference attributes of the products under consideration (Zaichkowsky, 1985, p. 9; DeBruicker, 1978). The level of a person’s involvement determines how much elaboration takes place (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). When involvement is high, the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) holds that the individual will have greater motivation to process (or elaborate) information about the product prior to making a decision (Martin, Camarero & Jose, 2011, p. 147).

Purchase-decision involvement. Purchase decision involvement relates to a behavior change regarding decision strategy and the choice adopted by a consumer when that consumer sees a purchasing situation of personal relevance or importance (Clarke & Belk, 1978; Engel & Blackwell, 1982; Howard, 1977; Lu et al., 2014; Mitchell & Olson, 2000). The importance and relevance of the product is assessed and weighed in relation to the perceived risk of making the purchase (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Low involvement products would be less relevant to the consumer such as a gift purchase while high involvement would involve something of personal importance to the shopper (Houston & Rothschild, 1978). When the purchase was important, the consumer expends energy to obtain information and reduce uncertainty (Zaichkowsky, 1985, p. 9). Based on past literature, this study examines the following research question:

RQ5: Will involvement influence the effects of the experimental treatments on the outcome measure purchase intentions?

2.11 Media Literacy

This study attempts to measure a given population's response to a journalistic website review containing two different disclosures that will be randomly assigned to different groups of subjects. Today, individuals have constant contact with media messages as both a consumer of information and as a creator of media. However, individuals approach media with varying levels of expertise and sophistication. Because of this fact, it seems prudent to include a discussion of the theoretical constructs related to media literacy. An individual's level of media literacy could moderate the influence of credibility on purchase intention and could possibly work as a confounding factor, influencing the strength of credibility as a mediating variable.

This research specifically examines online reviews published on the Internet, a form of what scholars call new media as opposed to old media which is best described as printed word and traditional broadcasting. New media is a subset of media literacy. Because new media involves the convergence of different digital technologies that are networked, it requires that an individual think in more than one dimension, namely "mental imagery, graphic skills and the capacity to reason spatially" (Aczel, 2014). New media is part of an emergent media culture in which media producers and consumers interact with each other "according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understand" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 3).

Eshet (2012) notes that digital literacy is a multidimensional concept that

involves individuals' ability to process, interpret, create and distribute content (Koc & Barut, 2016). There are "technical, cognitive, motoric, sociological and emotional aspects" to the concept of media literacy (Eshet, 2012, Koc & Barut, 2016, p. 834). The more digitally literate an individual, the better equipped they are to assess the accuracy, intention of a message and the credibility of the source of the content. The ability to analyze different types of media messages is essential in today's digital world. "Because marketing messages promote a product rather than provide a balanced representation of benefits and costs of the product use, critical thinking is required to fill this information gap" (Austin, Muldrow & Austin, 2016, p. 600) Critical thinking would certainly be needed to assess the information contained in online reviews. A review is an assessment of a product or service. It may be written by journalists but reviews are also written and distributed by marketers attempting to persuade individuals to buy a product or service.

An individual's personality and critical thinking skills play a role in how a message is processed by the receiver (Homer & Kahle, 1990; Vraga, Tully & Rojas, 2009). When assessing media literacy, two aspects of an individual's personality influence how the message is processed: the need for cognition (NFC) and the need for affect (NFA) (p. 601). Individuals who have a need for cognition are more thoughtful when processing media messages (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984) and they are more likely to engage in critical thinking (Priester & Petty, 1995). By comparison, individuals who exhibit the need for affect (NFA)

are more likely to focus on overall impression left by the message, rely on emotional bias such as source attractiveness and impressions relating to source expertise. These individuals also think less critically about the source of the message (Austin, Muldrow & Austin, 2016; Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Meyers-Ley & Malaviya, 1999; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Smith & DeCoster, 2000). It should be noted that personality type can influence how receptive an individual is to processing media messages, but personality does not predict behavior (Austin, Muldrow & Austin, 2016).

Media literacy education is viewed as a way to counterbalance the impact of marketing messages in today's economy (Austin, Muldrow & Austin, 2016, p. 601). Individuals are taught to understand a message's content, but they also need to be able to make use of new digital tools and technologies, act as socially responsible communicators and be willing to share knowledge and solve problems (Hobbs, 2010, Marten & Hobbs, 2015, p. 121). Digitally literate individuals have "photo-visual skills (understanding graphical visual messages), reproduction skills (creating meaningful media content), branching skills (constructing knowledge from complex and flexible hypermedia domains), information skills (judging the accuracy and quality of media content), socio emotional skills (communicating and working with others in the cyberspace) and real-time thinking (multi-tasking or processing different kinds of multimedia stimuli)" (Koc & Barut, 2016, p. 834).

Based on the importance of media literacy in how media messages are processed and understood, this study explores the following research question:

RQ6: Will media literacy influence the effects of the experimental treatments on the outcome measure purchase intentions?

Chapter 3 Methods and Measures

This section will provide an overview of the experimental research design employed in this dissertation. It will also outline the methodological rationale for the sample size and participants selected for this project, and describe how each of the study's key dependent variables and control measures were operationalized. It concludes by delineating the statistical analyses performed to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses outlined in the previous chapter.

3.1 Study Participants and Sample Size

Participants were recruited using Qualtrics Panel Management using methods consistent with other studies that have embedded experimental stimuli within online survey programs (see, e.g., Brandon, Long, Loraas, Chang & Vowles, 2013). An often-overlooked advantage of exploratory designs - such as the current research - is that non-significant findings can be further evaluated for statistical equivalence, which provides valuable information for scholars conducting related research as well as those conducting systematic reviews. To maximize this study's contribution to the corpus of scholarly knowledge, the sample size (N = 595) was determined using an a priori power analysis to ensure the study was adequately powered to conduct tests of statistical equivalence in cases where non-significant relationships are observed between the

experimental treatments and any of the study's dependent variables. Power calculations were conducted using G*Power, and based on equivalence bounds that reflect the inverse of Cohen's (1988) defined benchmark effect sizes that are small in nature (transformed in Cohen's d_z = -.0.2 and 0.2). Results from the power calculation indicated that at least 191 participants would be needed in each of the three conditions, offering sufficient power (.80 with alpha of .05) to assess equivalence among group means in cases where the null hypothesis is accepted (e.g., p >.05), while controlling for familywise error.

Qualtrics quotas were deployed to construct a representative national sample of adult U.S. consumers based on U.S. Census Bureau. Specifically, Qualtrics filtered respondents for the following Census quotas: gender, ethnicity, employment and age. The U.S. Census Bureau (https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/00) estimates there are 242.4 million adults (age 18 or older) living in the U.S., accounting for 76.5% of the 316 million U.S. population. The U.S. Census also reports that 50.9% of the population is female and 49.1% is male (Howden & Meyer, 2014). The Census Bureau reports that the median age of the U.S. population is approximately 38 years of age. The 18-44 working-age population accounted for the largest segment of the population, 36.5%, representing 112.8 million people. Older, working-age adults aged 45-64 accounted for 81.5 million people, or 26.4% of the population, followed by 65 and older, which was 40.3 million people or 13% (Howden & Meyer, 2011). All participants were asked to sign an electronic consent form prior to their participation in the study.

3.2 Experimental Procedure

To address the research questions and test the hypotheses posed in this dissertation, this research employed a single factorial design, with three between-subjects experimental conditions. After providing consent, participants in the study were randomly assigned one of three experimental conditions where they were asked to view the content of a faux website review (one with a disclosure statement stating that it was sponsored, one with a disclosure statement stating that it was not sponsored, and one with no disclosure statement) before completing a questionnaire containing the study's key dependent variables (credibility, disclosure, involvement, purchase intention, media literacy and trust). All procedures described in this section were approved by the University of South Carolina's Institutional Review Board.

3.3 Stimulus Materials

The three versions of a product review are shown in Figures 3.1-3.3. The faux copies of actual news stories were prepared based on previous research examining product reviews, news blogrolls, native advertising and disclosure placement (Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Kang, 2010; Kaye & Johnson, 2011; Lu, Chang, & Chang, 2014; Mackay & Lowry, 2011; Nah & Chung, 2012; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). Each treatment contained the same information about product features, accessories, pricing and how the model being reviewed compares with other products offered in the marketplace. Absent the disclosure, the content of each review was identical.

Each stimulus was created to appear as though it had been published by CNET, which is a news website offering reviews of technology products (www.cnet.com). CNET was selected as a template because it is rated as one of the top-10 sites for technology news (Webtoptenz.com, 2016). Amazon's Alexa page rank system currently ranks CNET as 106th most-popular website in the United States (Alexa.com, n.d.). Hype Stat reports that CNET receives approximately 3.19 million unique visitors daily and each visitor views 2.53 pages. Nearly 27% (26.8%) of the site's visitors come from the U.S., followed by India (9.9%) and Japan (7.3%), according to Hype Stat (http://www.hypestat.com/). The remaining visitors come from variety of countries, each representing 5% or less of visitors.

The product being evaluated was a Plantronics' BackBeat Go wireless in-ear headphones, commonly known as earbuds. Each review was the same length, approximately 267 words. The review template contained the same byline (name) of the writer, an identical photo of the reviewer who wrote the story and an identical photo of the product being reviewed. The body text of the review remained the same across all three versions: 11-point Verdana, block-style paragraphs with double spaces between paragraphs. On top of the review, was the same headline in black, bold-faced 20-point Verdana (font) type. The headline read, "Plantronics Wireless Earbuds Get Update." Each website page had an identical layout. A red CNET logo appeared at the top left of the page,

identifying where the review was published. Subpages appeared to the right of the logo, which could be clicked upon if this were indeed an active web page and span the width of the page. The subpages were titled: “Reviews,” “News,” “Video,” “How to,” “Smart Home,” “Cars,” “Deals,” and “Download.” A headline identifying the review topic appeared directly beneath the logo and subpages. Underneath the headline, also spanning the width of the page, was a clickable social media bar offering share options. All clickable options were color-coded to match each social media site’s corporate color – deep blue for Facebook, light blue for Twitter, etc. The review text followed. Each review contained a picture (1.5-inch wide x 3-inch tall) color photo of the earbuds tucked in a $20 accessory carrying case that could be purchased along with the headphones. The text of the review wrapped around the color photo of the carrying case. The different treatments are divided as follows:

Treatment 1: (no disclosure) contains no disclosure (Figure 3.1).

Treatment 2: (no sponsor) Author not paid by advertiser (Figure 3.2).

Treatment 3: (sponsored) Paid for by advertiser. (Figure 3.3).

Previous research suggests that improved disclosure statements could possibly lead to greater recognition and recall of the persuasive message (Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2016; Cameron & Curtin, 1995; van Reijmersdal, Lammers, Rozendaal, & Buijzen, 2015; Wojdynski, 2016). Improved disclosure can be interpreted in different ways, including different positioning, larger font size, bolder font, different backgrounds or different, less ambiguous word choice.

This study tested the impact of a disclosure statement informing viewers as to whether the author of the product review was compensated by an advertiser. Treatment 1 was a control and contained no disclosure. Treatment 2 (no sponsor) contains a disclosure stating the content appearing in the review was written by a reviewer who "did not receive any cash payments or free merchandise from advertisers in exchange for this review." Treatment 3 (sponsored) identified the content as being advertiser sponsored. Treatment 3's disclosure states: "The reviewer received cash payments and/or free merchandise from advertisers in exchange for this review."

Keeping with past recommendations by scholars, special attention was paid to the positioning the disclosure statement (sponsored, no sponsor) inside the text of the reviews in hope of increasing reader recognition. The statements were positioned in the middle of the product review. The disclosure text was indented and surrounded by approximately 24 points of white space. The placement of the text box and accompanying white space was identical on the two reviews containing a disclosure statement. Treatment 1 (no disclosure) did not contain a boxed disclosure statement since it is a control condition.

The positioning of the disclosure statement (See figures 3.1-3.3) was done after consulting previous eye tracking research recommending disclosures be positioned near the middle of a page (Cameron & Curtin, 1995; Hwang & Jeong, 2016; Wojdynski, 2016; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). In addition to the where the disclosure is positioned on the page, reader recognition can be influenced by the disclosure's font, type size, background and typeface color.

Publishers typically label sponsored editorial content with nondescript statements such as “from our partners,” “brand voice,” or “sponsored” Use of ambiguous terminology may help explain why readers often miss disclosure label regardless of where it is positioned (Keib & Tatge, 2016).

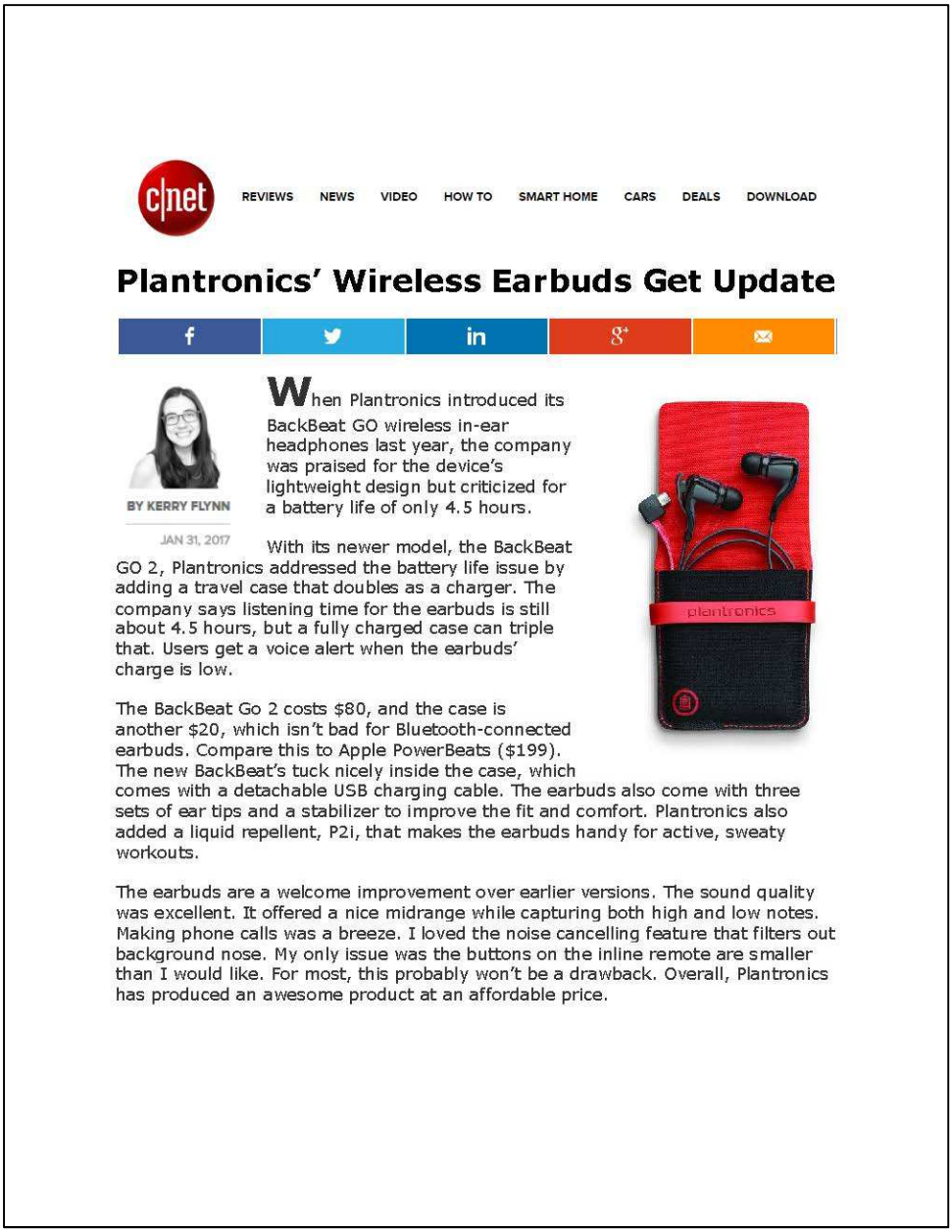

Figure 3.1 Treatment 1 No Disclosure

c|net REVIEWS NEWS VIDEO HOW TO SMART HOME CARS DEALS DOWNLOAD

Plantronics' Wireless Earbuds Get Update

BY KERRY FLYNN

JAN 31, 2017

When Plantronics introduced its BackBeat GO wireless in-ear headphones last year, the company was praised for the device's lightweight design but criticized for a battery life of only 4.5 hours.

With its newer model, the BackBeat GO 2, Plantronics addressed the battery life issue by adding a travel case that doubles as a charger. The company says listening time for the earbuds is still about 4.5 hours, but a fully charged case can triple that. Users get a voice alert when the earbuds' charge is low.

The BackBeat Go 2 costs $80, and the case is another $20, which isn't bad for Bluetooth-connected earbuds. Compare this to Apple PowerBeats ($199). The new BackBeat's tuck nicely inside the case, which comes with a detachable USB charging cable. The earbuds also come with three sets of ear tips and a stabilizer to improve the fit and comfort. Plantronics also added a liquid repellent, P2i, that makes the earbuds handy for active, sweaty workouts.

The reviewer did not receive any cash payments or free merchandise from advertisers in exchange for this review.

The earbuds are a welcome improvement over earlier versions. The sound quality was excellent. It offered a nice midrange while capturing both high and low notes. Making phone calls was a breeze. I loved the noise cancelling feature that filters out background nose. My only issue was the buttons on the inline remote are smaller than I would like. For most, this probably won't be a drawback. Overall, Plantronics has produced an awesome product at an affordable price.

Figure 3.2 Treatment 2 No Sponsor

c|net REVIEWS NEWS VIDEO HOW TO SMART HOME CARS DEALS DOWNLOAD

Plantronics' Wireless Earbuds Get Update

BY KERRY FLYNN

JAN 31, 2017

When Plantronics introduced its BackBeat GO wireless in-ear headphones last year, the company was praised for the device's lightweight design but criticized for a battery life of only 4.5 hours.

With its newer model, the BackBeat GO 2, Plantronics addressed the battery life issue by adding a travel case that doubles as a charger. The company says listening time for the earbuds is still about 4.5 hours, but a fully charged case can triple that. Users get a voice alert when the earbuds' charge is low.

The BackBeat Go 2 costs $80, and the case is another $20, which isn't bad for Bluetooth-connected earbuds. Compare this to Apple PowerBeats ($199). The new BackBeat's tuck nicely inside the case, which comes with a detachable USB charging cable. The earbuds also come with three sets of ear tips and a stabilizer to improve the fit and comfort. Plantronics also added a liquid repellent, P2i, that makes the earbuds handy for active, sweaty workouts.

The reviewer received cash payments and/or free merchandise from advertisers in exchange for this review.

The earbuds are a welcome improvement over earlier versions. The sound quality was excellent. It offered a nice midrange while capturing both high and low notes. Making phone calls was a breeze. I loved the noise cancelling feature that filters out background nose. My only issue was the buttons on the inline remote are smaller than I would like. For most, this probably won't be a drawback. Overall, Plantronics has produced an awesome product at an affordable price.

Figure 3.3 Treatment 3 Sponsored

3.4 Dependent Measures

After being exposed to one of three-randomly assigned experimental conditions the study's respondents were asked to answer a series of questions based on the study's variables. The variables selected for this research were based on previous studies: media literacy (Koc and Barut; 2016); credibility (Appelman & Sundar, 2016); disclosure (Wojdynski, Evans, & Hoy, 2017); trust (Pavlou, 2001; Gefen, 2003; Ghazizadeh, Peng, Lee & Boyle, 2012); purchase intention (Taylor & Baker, 1994); and involvement (McKeever, McKeever, Holton, & Li, 2016). The variables were adapted to fit the specific topic of this study, namely to test what impact the disclosure that editorial content has no advertising sponsorship has on readers' perceived credibility.

The questionnaire was divided into seven question blocks: 1. demographics (1 block containing 5 items); 2. media literacy (1 question block consisting of 18 items); 3. credibility (1 question block consisting of 3 items); 4. trust (1 question block consisting of 8 items); 5. disclosure (1 question block consisting of 3 items); 6. purchase intention (1 question block consisting of 3 items); 7. involvement (1 question block consisting of 5 items). A discussion of each scale's properties (e.g., internal reliability coefficients) follows the description of each of the quantitative dependent measures listed below. A copy of the questionnaire is included in the appendix of this document.

3.5 Dependent Variables

Media Literacy – Media literacy was assessed using an 18-item media literacy scale developed by Koc and Barut (2016). The scale measures functional consumption of media usage with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = “strongly disagree”; 5 = “strongly agree”). The respondents were asked to evaluate to what extent they agree or disagree with the following statements: “I know how to use searching tools to get information needed in the media,” “I am good at catching up with the changes in the media,” “It is easy for me to make use of various media environments to reach information,” “I realize explicit and implicit media messages,” “I notice media contents containing mobbing and violence,” “I understand political, economic and social dimensions of media contents,” I perceive different opinions and thoughts in the media,” “I can distinguish different functions of media (communication, entertainment, etc.),” I am able to determine whether or not media contents have commercial messages,” “I manage to classify media messages based on their producers, types, purposes and so on,” “I can compare news and information across different media environments,” “I can combine media messages with my own opinions,” “I consider media rating symbols to choose which media contents to use,” “It is easy for me to make a decision about the accuracy of media messages,” “I am able to analyze positive and negative effects of media contents on individuals,” “I can evaluate media in terms of legal and ethical rules (copyright, human rights, etc.), “I can assess media in terms of credibility, reliability, objectivity and currency,” and “I manage

to fend myself from the risks and consequences caused by media content." This scale demonstrated a high degree of internal consistency when subjected to reliability analysis (*M* = 3.97, *SD* = 0.753, α = .95).

Credibility – Credibility was assessed using a using three-item message credibility scale developed by Appelman and Sundar (2016). The scale measures the credibility of a message with a 7-point Likert-type scale (1= "*strongly disagree*"; 7 = "*strongly agree*"). The respondents were asked to evaluate to what extent they agree or disagree with the following statements: "The review is accurate," "The review is believable," and "The review is authentic." Reliability analysis indicated these items were internally consistent (M = 5.5, SD = 1.32, α = .814).

Trust – Trust was assessed using eight items adapted from previous studies (Pavlou, 2001; Gefen, 2003; Ghazizadeh et al., 2012). Participants were asked to evaluate eight trust-related statements using a five-point Likert-type response format (1= "*strongly disagree*"; 5 = "*strongly agree*"): "I trust the information about this product on CNET," "This website is trustworthy," "I trust this website to keep my best interests in mind," "The product information accurately reflects the quality of the product," "I think I can depend on this product," "I would feel comfortable using this product," "I trust this website is offering products selling at a fair price," and "I trust this website's reviews when making purchase selections." Reliability analysis indicated these items were internally consistent (M = 3.53, SD = 0.814, α = 0.946).

Disclosure – Disclosure of the review content was measured using items from a factor-correlated model developed to transparency of a content disclosure (Wojdynski, Evans & Hoy, 2017, p.15). Participants were asked to evaluate three statements related to disclosure. The factor was assessed using a seven-point Likert-type response format (1= "*strongly disagree*"; 7 = "*strongly agree*"). As far as disclosure, the following statements will be asked: "The product review clearly stated it was an advertisement," "The product review said it was sponsored by an advertiser," and "The product review was labeled as advertising." Reliability analysis indicated these items were internally consistent (M = 4.07, SD = 1.58, = .65).

Purchase intention – Purchase intention was assessed using three seven-point measures adapted from Taylor and Baker (1994). Each statement was evaluated using a seven-point Likert-type response format (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"): "The next time I need wireless earbuds, I will choose Plantronics," "If I had needed wireless earbuds during the past year, I would have selected Plantronics," and "In the next year, if I need the wireless earbuds, I will choose Plantronics." This scale demonstrated a high level of internal consistency when subjected to reliability analysis (M = 4.60; SD = 1.47; α = 0.934), and was therefore summed and averaged to create a composite measure of purchase intention.

Involvement – Involvement was measured using five items adapted from previous research (e.g., Matthes, 2013; McKeever, McKeever, Holton, & Li, 2016), which asked participants to rate their agreement with the following

statements using a seven-point Likert-type response format (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). The statements are: “It is important to me to know all the arguments regarding earbuds in detail,” “The more information I get regarding earbuds, the better,” “It is important to me to know as much as possible about earbuds,” “I rarely spend much time thinking about earbuds (reverse-scored),” and “I am not interested in specific information regarding earbuds (reverse scored)” Reliability analysis indicated these items were internally consistent (M = 5.0; SD = 0.99; α = 0.65).

3.6 Demographics & Potential Covariates

Participants were also asked a series of demographic questions related to their age, household income, ethnicity, gender, and level of education. Media literacy was assessed using 18-item scale (*M* = 3.97, *SD* = 0.753, α = .95) developed by Koc and Barut (2016) because prior research has found an individual’s level of media literacy is prominent determinant of the extent in which they may be affected by a particular media message. Although, by design, inter-individual differences in media literacy should be randomly distributed across the experimental conditions, this measure was included as a safeguard in case media literacy was disproportionately distributed across the three groups, which would provide an alternative explanation for unexpected findings related to the central hypotheses in the current research.

3.7 Data and Statistical Analyses

The data from the experiment exported from Qualtrics and imported into IBM® SPSS (Version 24.0) statistical software. The main effects of the

experimental conditions on the study's dependent measures were examined using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) procedures. To assess the hypothesized intervening role of perceived credibility, multi-categorical mediation analyses was conducted using bias-corrected bootstrapped samples of the data (as implemented in the PROCESS macro [Hayes, 2013] for SPSS. Items for each variable were assessed for internal consistency before averaging them into a composite measure. The analysis tested the stated hypotheses, examining the impact of direct and indirect effect of three conditions on the dependent variables – credibility, disclosure, media literacy, trust, purchase intention and involvement. The findings were reported and discussed.

Chapter 4 Findings

This chapter reports the demographic and descriptive statistics of the participants in this study (N=595) before answering the dissertation's six research questions and four proposed hypotheses. The remainder of the chapter presents the results of the analyses.

4.1 Demographic and Descriptive Statistics

As depicted in Table 4.1, the study's participants (N=595) were evenly split between males (49.7%) and females (50.3%). Most the participants were white or Caucasian (62.5%), followed by Hispanic (17.1%), African American (13.3%) and Asian (5.2%). Twelve participants (1.9%) reported being Native American, Pacific Islander or an unspecified ethnicity.

Nearly half the respondents (47.2%) were between the ages of 18 and 33 with the 26 to 33 age group being the largest single age group (24%), followed by 18 to 25 (23.2%). The third largest age group was 34-41 (18.3%), followed by 42-49 (11.3%). Respondents in the 50 and older age group accounted for 23.2% of the total participants in the study. The 50-57 age group (8.7%) was followed by 58-65 (6.4%) and 66 and older (8.1%). Most the respondents (see Table 4.1) were employed full or part-time (61.8%). Twenty-one percent were

Table 4.1 Demographics of study participants

Gender	*N*	%
Male	296	49.7
Female	299	50.3
Ethnicity	*N*	%
White/Caucasian	372	62.5
African America	79	13.3
Hispanic	102	17.1
Asian	31	5.2
Native American	1	0.2
Pacific Islander	1	0.2
Other	9	1.5
Age	*N*	%
18-25	138	23.2
26-33	143	24.0
34-41	109	18.3
42-49	67	11.3
50-57	52	8.7
58-65	38	6.4
66+	48	8.1
Education	*n*	*%*
Less than High School	15	2.5
High School / GED	170	28.6
Some College or Associate's	186	31.3
4-year College Degree	137	23.0
Master's Degree	53	8.9
Doctoral Degree	15	2.5
Professional Degree (JD, MD)	19	3.2
Employment	*N*	%
Full or part-time	368	61.8
Unemployed	65	10.9
Student	57	9.6
Homemaker	45	7.6
Retired	60	10.1

N = 595

retired (10.1%) or unemployed (10.9%) while the remainder of the participants were students (9.6%) or homemakers (7.6%). More than half the participants (53.3%) reported completing a four-year college degree (23%), or stated they had completed an associate's degree or some post- secondary study at a college or university (31.3%). Nearly 15% of the respondents reported having completed a master's (8.9%), doctoral (2.5%) or professional degree (3.2%). Twenty-eight percent (28.6%) had a high school education or GED while 2.5% had less than a high school education.

4.2 Research Questions & Hypotheses

This section examines tests of the direct and indirect effects of online reviews on each of the study's dependent variables – credibility, trust, disclosure, purchase intention, involvement and media literacy. The section ends with a multicategorical mediation analysis and examination of the impact of covariates on two outcome variables, involvement and media literacy.

Credibility – Recall the first research question (RQ1) asked: What is the relationship between disclosure statements (sponsored, no sponsor or no disclosure) and credibility*?* To answer this question, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with the credibility as the dependent measure and the experimental treatment condition serving as the independent variable. The ANOVA results indicated there was a statistically significant relationship between the experimental conditions and the key dependent measure of credibility: $F(2, 592) = 3.99$, $p < .05$. To probe the nature of these differences and test the study's

first hypothesis, post-hoc analysis was conducted using the Dunnett's t-test, which is the appropriate procedure for conducting planned directional comparisons among multiple groups relative to an individual baseline group, which in this case was the sponsored disclosure group. Results from the analysis indicated participants in the "no sponsor" disclosure review condition (M = 5.72, SD = 1.24) perceived the review to be more credible than participants in the control condition (M = 5.59, SD = 1.31) and "sponsored review" condition (M = 5.35, SD = 1.38), and that these paired differences were statistically significant at $p < .05$. Findings from this analysis also indicated there were no statistically significant differences in perceived credibility between those in the control condition and participants in the sponsored review condition (p = .56). Thus, the study's first hypothesis (H1), which posited that a review disclosed as having no sponsor would have greater credibility than a review disclosed as ad sponsored, was supported.

Trust – Research question 2 (RQ2) asked: What is the relationship between disclosure statements (sponsored, no sponsor or no disclosure) and trust. There was not a significant effect between groups at the p <.05 level when examining the impact of the different product review disclosure statements related to trust [F (2,592) = 1.253, p = .286]. Given that the results were not significant (p <.05), a post hoc comparison was not reported.

Disclosure – Research question 3 (RQ3) asked: What is the relationship between disclosure statements (sponsored, no sponsor or no disclosure) and

disclosure? There was a significant effect between groups at the p <.05 level when assessing whether respondents recognized different informational disclosures contained inside the body of the product reviews identifying the content as persuasive communication [F (2,592) = 6.661, p = .001]. Given that a statistically significant result was found, post hoc Dunnett's test comparisons were computed to examine directional comparisons among the groups. The comparison's showed participants in the "no sponsor" review condition (M = 3.81, SD = 1.67) expressed higher level understanding the accompanying disclosure message than participants in the control condition (M = 4.03, SD = 1.57) which contained no disclosure message and the "sponsored review" condition (M = 4.37, SD = 1.44) which was labeled as being a paid advertising message. Each of these findings were significant at p < .05 level.

Purchase intention – Research question 4 (RQ4) asked: What is the relationship between disclosure statements (sponsored, no sponsor or no disclosure) and purchase intention? There was a significant effect between groups at the p <.05 level regarding different product review disclosure statements shown and purchase intention [F (2,592) = 7.222, p =. 001]. The post hoc comparisons were computed using a Dunnett's t-test. The comparisons showed participants in the "no sponsor" review condition (M = 4.86, SD = 1.36) expressed higher levels of purchase intention than participants in the control condition (M = 4.64, SD = 1.50) and the "sponsored review" condition (M = 4.31, SD = 1.50). Each of these findings were significant at p < .05 level. These

findings offered support for the study's second hypothesis (H2), which posited that participants viewing a review disclosed as having no sponsor would express a higher level of purchase intentions than individuals viewing a review disclosed as ad sponsored.

Involvement – Recall that research question 5 (RQ5) asked: Will involvement influence the effects of the experimental treatments on the outcome measure purchase intentions? In this study, involvement was posed as a research question since there was not sufficient evidence in the literature to warrant a prediction as it relates to online reviews. The initial ANOVA tests indicated there was not a significant effect between groups at the $p > .05$ level regarding involvement and different disclosures contained in product reviews [$F(2,592) = 1.006$, $p = .366$]. Since the relationship between groups was not significant, a Dunnett's post hoc t- test was not reported.

Media Literacy – Research question 6 (RQ6) asked: Will media literacy influence the effects of the experimental treatments on the outcome measure purchase intentions? A research question was selected rather than a prediction since media literacy and online reviews has not been examined in previously literature. The ANOVA tests indicated there was not a significant effect between groups at the $p < .05$ level regarding different product review disclosure statements shown viewers and media literacy [$F(2,592) = 1.53$, $p = 0.235$]. Because there were no significant differences between the experimental groups, post hoc comparisons were not warranted.

4.3 Multicategorical Mediation Analysis

Bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 bootstrapped samples of the data were used to produce bias-corrected confidence intervals for testing the hypothesized mediation effect. Using this analytical approach, any indirect effect can be interpreted as statistically significant if the associated bootstrapped confidence intervals do not straddle a value of zero. Results of the analysis indicated there was a statistically significant indirect effect of the product review disclosure type (no sponsor vs. sponsor) on purchase intentions through perceived credibility (point estimate = .2252, *SE* = .08, 95% CI [.06, .388]). (Figure 4.1)

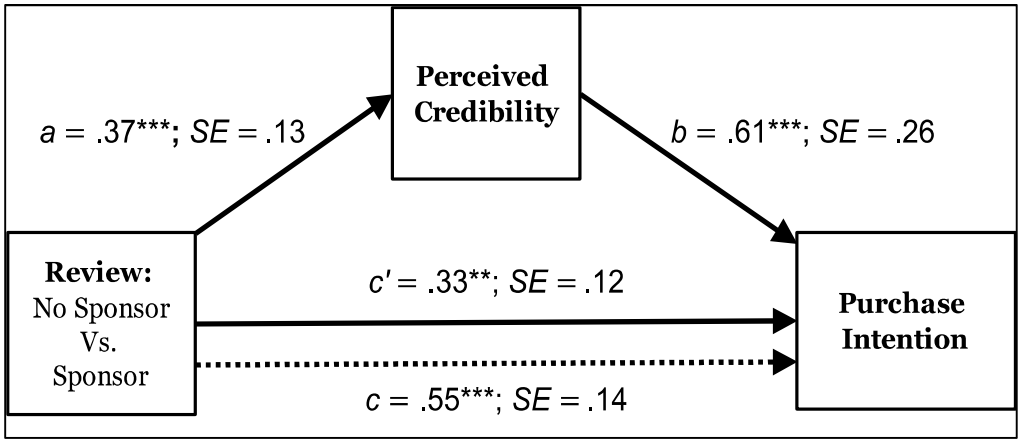

Figure 4.1 Mediation Model: Note that path coefficients for a, b, c are unstandardized. The c path denotes the effect of the independent variable when the mediatior is not included in the model. Conceptually, mediation relates to the product of the a and b paths in the model, while statistical inference about the mediation is derived from bootstrapped confidence intervals associated with the test.

These findings offer support for the study's third hypothesis (H3), which stated that perceived credibility will be positively associated with greater intentions to purchase the reviewed product. The mediation analysis also showed support for the fourth hypothesis (H4) which predicted that credibility will mediate the relationship between the review sponsorship type (sponsored, no sponsor or no disclosure) and purchase intention. Recall that earlier testing (ANOVA) showed that readers perceived non-sponsored reviews written by a journalist as having greater credibility than ad-sponsored reviews or the control condition (no disclosure). Readers were also more likely to rely on a non-sponsored review's information and recommendations when weighing a purchase decision.

Chapter 5 Discussion

This study found that the perceived credibility of an online review mediates purchasing intention. Offering a statement disclosing that a product review was not sponsored by an advertiser created the perception that it was more credible in the eyes of readers viewing the online review. Conversely, readers who were informed that the author of an online review was paid by an advertiser, or received free merchandise, perceived the review to be less credible. Previous research has shown that source disclosure allows readers to assess credibility and builds trust (Hovland & Weiss, 1951, Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010; McCroskey & Young, 1981; Reich, 2011). But there is a lack of uniformity in how the source is disclosed regarding Internet content. (Luhn, 2008; Lim & van Der Heide, 2015; Metzger et al., 2003; Shaw, 1998; Sundar, 1998).

This research was conceptualized with the goal of offering insight into how to improve the credibility of journalistic articles published on the Internet. The research attempts to build on past work of Appelman & Sundar (2016), who theorized that message credibility is influenced by the believability, authenticity and accuracy of the message being conveyed by the source. The current study found that an online review was perceived to be credible by readers if it contained a disclosure denoting the content was not ad sponsored. Participants in the “no sponsor” disclosure review condition perceived the online review to

more credible than participants in the control condition and "sponsored review" condition. These paired differences were statistically significant. Findings also indicated there were no statistically significant differences in perceived credibility between those in the control condition and participants in the sponsored review condition. Thus, informing a reader that the author of an online product review was not compensated by an advertiser in exchange for writing the review, resulted in greater perceived credibility.

When examining trust, there was not a significant effect when assessing the impact of different product review disclosure statements. That may be because the scales used in the questionnaire were geared more toward assessing trust in the website publishing the content, rather than the editorial content published by the website. Recall that each participant was shown a journalistic product review evaluating a popular electronics product published on the website CNET. CNET focuses on technology news and publishes independent reviews about new products. CNET is not in the business of selling products. Previous studies have shown that trust is an important component when it comes to e-commerce. E-commerce websites (e.g. Amazon, Best Buy) rely on shoppers' reviews to help drive traffic and online sales. Consumers see online reviews appearing on e-commerce websites as a way to gather information and speed decision-making. Consumer-written reviews are viewed by readers as being more trustworthy than traditional advertisements, a factor that influences adoption and purchase behavior (Huang et al., 2007; Wang & Benbast, 2005). Roughly half of Americans (51%) who read online reviews say

the reviews generally give an accurate picture of a company, but “a similar share (48%) believes it is often hard to tell if online reviews are truthful and unbiased” (Smith & Anderson, 2016).

This study found that the different disclosure statements had different levels of recognition. Participants shown an online review with a disclosure statement identifying the review as not being advertising sponsored expressed a higher level of understanding of the disclosure’s contents. By comparison, other participants shown an online review stating the reviewer “received cash payments and/or free merchandise from advertisers in exchange for this review” expressed a lower level of understanding of the disclosure statements.

The differences might be explained by the fact that some participants misread the disclosure statement or missed the disclosure statement altogether. Research shows this is not uncommon. When disclosure statements are recognized, and readers realize what they are reading is indeed paid advertising, readers view the content less credible (Boerman, van Reijmersdal & Neijens, 2015; Kim, Pasadeos & Barban, 2001; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016; Wu et al., 2016). It should be noted that publishers are required by federal rules to disclose sponsored content, but not all publishers comply with the law (FTC, 2009; Walden et al., 2015). Upwards of 20% of published reviews are fake, meaning the individual never visited the restaurant or purchased the product. Offering a more detailed disclosure detailing whether the author was paid by an advertiser to write the review might instill confidence that the reviewer’s evaluation is

independent and the recommendations can be relied upon to make purchasing decisions.

Post hoc comparisons showed participants in the “no sponsor” review condition expressed higher levels of purchase intention than participants in the control condition and the “sponsored review” condition. Results of a mediation analysis indicated there was a statistically significant indirect effect of the product review disclosure type (no sponsor vs. sponsor) on purchase intentions through perceived credibility. Perceived credibility effectively mediated readers’ intentions to purchase the product evaluated by the reviewer. One logical extension worth examining in future research is whether greater perceived credibility can be equated with greater desire on the part of readers to consume journalistic-produced news stories that are independent and not sponsored by advertisers.

This study’s results are consistent with prior research showing that online reviews are influential with consumers by building trust, reducing uncertainty and mitigating risk related to purchasing decisions (Ba & Pavlou, 2002; Dou et al., 2012’ Hamby, Daniloski, & Brinberg, 2014; Pavlou & Gefen, 2004; Lim & van Der Heide, 2015; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013; Racherla & Fiske, 2012; Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Tatge & McKeever, 2016; Wang & Benbast, 2005). Consumers who use reviews are twice as likely to purchase the recommended product than someone who didn’t consult the review (Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013; Robson, Farshid, Bredican, & Humphrey, 2013, p. 2 ; Senecal & Nantel; 2004; Zhang et al., 2010).

Both involvement and media literacy were assessed for the potential moderation effects and confounding factors. Past research holds that the level of an individual's involvement in a product influences their attitudes and purchasing behavior regarding a product (Petty, Cacioppo, Schumann, 1983; Engel & Blackwell, 1982; Krugman, 1965; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Sherif & Hovland, 1961). Involvement has a moderating influence in purchasing decisions, but is not necessarily a determinant of a consumer's willingness to purchase a product (Mittal, 1989). Consumers also tend to assess a product based on their individual needs and alternatives that are available when deciding to make a purchase. When a consumer is highly involved, a message has a high degree of personal relevance while low involvement means the individual may dismiss the message altogether (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Media literacy and involvement were tested and there was not a significant difference between the experimental conditions.

5.1 Contribution to theory

The findings that a text disclosure statements influences readers' perceptions about credibility has practical implications for news, editorial and advertising across multiple Internet delivery platforms. News and Internet information currently faces a credibility crisis. Nearly two thirds (62%) of the public receives their news from social media, yet 98% say they distrust what they read because the information is outdated, self-promotional or inaccurate (Borden & Tew, 2007; Ho, 2012).

Appelman and Sundar (2016) note that past studies have examined the

perceived credibility of the person posting information on social media, the perceived credibility of the social media site, but “tend not to examine the media content directly” (Appelman & Sundar, 2016, p. 60; Cunningham & Bright, 2012; Castillo, Mendoza & Poblete, 2013; Edwards, Spence, Gentile, Edwards & Edwards, 2013; Hwang, 2013; Lee & Ahn, 2013; Park, Xiang, Josiam & Kim, 2014; Lee & Ahn, 2013).

Currently, there is no existing theory related to message, medium or source credibility. Scholars have struggled with how to best define credibility, which is a multi-dimensional construct, making it difficult to isolate the variables being measured. Consequently, there are dozens of constructs that have been tested to assess credibility. This study relied on the definition offered by Appelman & Sundar (2016), which defines message credibility as being a distinct concept that differs from source credibility and medium credibility (Appelman & Sundar, p. 74). Source credibility may be best defined as the quoted source or the source of the information being published for consumption. Medium credibility refers to the publishing platform – Web, broadcast, social, print.

When discussing message source, it is important to distinguish between message source as it pertains to journalistic news articles and source as it relates blogs, restaurant reviews and social media posts. In the case of an online review, the message source is the author of the article rather than an expert or observer whose words appear in quotation marks. By comparison, journalists are not sources. Instead, they collect, distill and assemble information obtained from

multiple sources. Some journalists also author product reviews. But editors hold journalists to strict editorial standards, requiring opinions be supported by facts and that sources be disclosed. Many sources of information published on the Internet, including online reviews, are not subjected to the same rigorous, prepublication standards as traditional journalists when assessing bias, accuracy and objectivity (Johnson & Kaye, 1998, p.331).

When attempting to assess the credibility of online reviews written by individuals, readers rely on heuristics such as the author's name, photo and other biographical information (hometown, interests, friends) to assess the reviewer's expertise (Sussman & Siegal, 2003; Fogg et al., 2001). Readers give more weight to reviewers who they feel are genuine and "have social backgrounds, tastes and preferences" similar to their own (Racherla & Friske, 2012, p.550). Likeability of the reviewer is equated with credibility, and if readers like the reviewer, the content is considered more believable (Sundar, 1998). This may explain why reviews written by celebrities carry greater influence with readers (Bae & Lee, 2011; Robinson, Goh, & Zhang, 2012; West & Broniarczyk, 1998).

Theory is based on four basic criteria: definition of terms or variables, domain (where the theory applies), relationships between variables and predictions (factual claims) (Wacker, 1998, p. 363). Theories are supposed to "carefully outline the precise definitions in a specific domain and explain why and how the relationships are logically tied so the theory gives specific predictions" Wacker, 1998, p. 363-64). Poole and van de Ven (1989) note that "a good theory is by definition, a limited and fairly precise picture" (van de Ven, 1989;

Wacker,1998, p. 364). The definition of credibility research has remained stalled at the conceptual level due to an inability to agree on what constitutes credible communication. If researchers are unable to agree on a concrete definition of credibility, it is very difficult to test relationships and make predictions. The Internet has greatly altered not just how messages are created, but how information is shared and distributed, posing both new challenges and new opportunities for communications researchers.

The study applies the conceptual definition advanced by Appelman & Sundar (2016), and in doing so, shows the value of evaluating credibility from the message perspective. Using Appelman & Sundar definition, the current study found that journalistic online reviews containing a disclosure statement identifying the message (e.g. online review) were perceived by readers to be significantly more “accurate, “authentic” and “believable” than reviews containing a disclosure labeling the review as advertising sponsored. In developing the definition of message credibility, Appelman & Sundar note all three items are message based and were useful for assessing message credibility both within and outside the field of journalism (p. 73). The two researchers note that other factors are also at play. “From our model, it appears that professional writing quality (complete, concise, consistent, well-presented) contributes quite significantly to perceptions of message credibility as does a sense of fairness” (P. 74). This study offers a unique contribution by applying Appelman & Sundar’s credibility scale to journalistic news articles containing disclosure statements.

5.2 Role of Transparency

At the core of this study, is an examination of transparency. Adding a disclosure statement to editorial content, is unorthodox in journalism circles where the separation between advertising and news was once considered sacrosanct. During the past five years, the wall between the two worlds has come down. Publishers, suffering a severe deterioration in display advertising and classified advertising, have embraced native content as way to save their editorial business. Wojdynski & Evans (2016) note that native advertising's success lies in its ability to not resemble advertising. Native advertising has become a $22 billion business growing 36% annually ("eMarketer," 2017), but critics view it as Internet misinformation. Nearly everyone (98%) who use the Internet say they distrust what they read (Borden & Tew, 2007; Ho, 2012). About two in three U.S. adults (64%) say what they consume creates a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events (Barthel et al., 2016).

If publishers are to improve reader credibility, it would seem greater transparency would allow readers to assess the integrity of information contained in a news story, online review or video (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 1999). Less than 15% of bloggers disclose relationships with corporations and advertisers (Walden et al., 2015). Many freelancers, who work at home and receive little in the way of pay or benefits, consider it part of their compensation to accept freebies in exchange for writing corporate sponsored content. This practice is not always

disclosed to readers even though this would influence readers' trust (Carr & Hayes, 2014). Publications as a rule don't differentiate between freelance-written material and articles written by fulltime salaried staff writers. How an individual is compensated (staff writer vs. freelance) may indeed be one way to improve transparency.

Another way to get readers to trust content is to offer them ways to check information they consume. Fact- and source-checking tools are slowly emerging. So far, these tools are crude and have been ineffective in solving the problem. Fact-checking websites, for example, rely on individuals who manually check information. Whether falsehoods and errors are spotted depends on either the experience of the fact checker. Other websites rely on computer algorithms, which match key words against other facts published on the Internet. Even if fact-checking tools improve, there is another factor to consider: The volume of information distributed each day on the Internet is overwhelming, making it impossible to fact check each piece of information. The popular social media website Twitter, for example, distributes more than 500 million messages each day (http://www.internetlivestats.com/twitter-statistics/). Ultimately, the responsibility for deciding whether the information credible is being borne by the individual media consumer (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000, Westerman, Spence & van Der Heider, 2013).

In the past, professional journalists filtered information prior to its publication by checking its accuracy, fairness and whether a story respected the

laws governing privacy, defamation and copyright (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Product, movie, restaurant, book and art reviews were written by salaried, college-educated journalists, not unpaid individuals typing on a mobile phone. Journalists were governed by strict professional standards regarding truth, transparency and honesty (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). With the downsizing of the traditional news media, and the subsequent loss of 237,000 journalists since 2007 (Loechner, 2016), no comparable system has emerged to fact check information prior to distribution on social media platforms. Traditional media organizations previously served as gatekeepers of information and shielded the public from factual inaccuracy and deliberate fakery (Lewin, 1947, McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

One solution might be to label all Internet content. The labels would be similar to those already appearing on food, drugs and household products. Food and drug product manufacturers are currently required to label their products. Mandating a labeling requirement for media content would be resisted by companies on the grounds that such a requirement infringes on First Amendment speech. However, content creators could be pressured to voluntarily disclosure the sources in accordance with agreed upon standards governing content creation (e.g. fact checking, no payments from sources, etc.) Content creators that did not adhere to these standards could not carry the requisite label and would be assumed by the public to be unsafe for public consumption.

There is also a bigger issue at stake here. Economists often point to

information transparency as being a key factor for making markets operate efficiently (Williams & Reade, 2016). “Cognitive-based trust is founded on information and rational choice. It arises only when the beneficial intention and competence of another is proved by reliable information” (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Simons, 2002; Zhang, Liu, Sayogo, Picazo-Vela, & Luna-Reyes, 2016). Information also plays a key role in individuals’ behavior and decision-making (Thaler, 2015). One example is how consumers use cellular phones to check the price of an item offered for sale on Amazon before making a retail store purchase (Forman, Ghose, & Goldfarb, 2009). Great transparency about prices has led to greater competition among retailers and lower prices for consumers. It would seem only logical that improved disclosure about sources used to prepare a news article could have a similar effect on content quality, improving reader trust and the accuracy of information published on the Internet.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This study’s methodological design appropriately reflects the settings of the investigation. However, the study is limited by its scope and design – it tests the views of one population viewing manipulated online reviews. While the findings are significant and defensible, the design limits the applicability to larger population. The respondent pool was national in scope and may have been limited in unknowable ways since Qualtrics was hired to recruit the panel of subjects participated in the experiment.

The large sample size (N=595) might explain the high levels of perceived credibility exhibited by participants observing the disclosure statement noting that an online review was not advertiser sponsored. Post hoc questions asked at the end of study revealed that respondents had either missed the disclosurestatement or answered the study as though they had viewed a different disclosure than the one shown during the experiment. This finding is consistent with previous research it also deserves further examination. As noted earlier, this study took into consideration recommendations from earlier eye tracking studies when deciding where to position the disclosure statement. Even when the disclosure is placed in the middle the page and surrounded with white space to offset it from accompanying text, readers miss the disclosure statement. One explanation for why readers still missed the disclosure in this study may be that readers, having grown accustomed to banner advertising, automatically skip through anything that interrupts the flow of a website news article. This finding further demonstrates that publishers need to come up with a better way to place disclosure statements inside of text so readers actually view and read the disclosure.

One possible limitation of this study related to perceptions about the credibility of the online review viewed by participants averaged above 5 on a 7-point Likert scale. This finding merits further investigation. The stimulus used in this experiment was developed by a professional journalist who worked to make the review representative of a news website. The high credibility scores may be more a reflection of the perceived authenticity of the article template rather the

accompanying disclosure statement.There are many opportunities for future research related to disclosure statements and the impact on reader credibility. One obvious direction would be to examine how credibility of the message is influenced when readers perceive the message to be of low accuracy, authenticity and believability. Disclosure statements could be tested as possible moderators in situations of both low and high-quality messages.

Finally, since this study tested message credibility, it would seem that a natural point of inquiry would be to examine the interaction between message credibility and source credibility. Message quality may matter less under circumstances where perceptions of source credibility are high. The same may be true for disclosure statements. They may have less influence when source credibility is high and greater influence in cases where the message credibility is low. This study also did not test whether readers expressing a higher level of perceived credibility were more likely to purchase the news product produced by the publisher. This would seem to be a logical extension of this research. In other words, can publishers monetize content that readers perceive as believable and truthful? Only through further research will scholars develop a better understanding of whether disclosure statements might help publishers in their bid to reestablish trust and regain lost credibility in an era dominated by misinformation, fake news and native advertising.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Informed Consent

Hello, Thank you for your interest in my research. Before proceeding, please read the following message carefully. If you are not a resident of the United States of America, you are not eligible to participate in this research. Please exit the study. This project explores your thoughts and reactions related to a review of a popular consumer electronics product. You will first read the reviewer's evaluation about the product. You will then be asked to answer a series of questions.

The study will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. You will not be asked to reveal any personal information in the research. Any identifying information collected will be confidential, meaning that I (the investigator) will be only one who will receive and process the information. It will be stored in a password-protected computer. It is important that you remain attentive throughout the study.

Please carefully read and respond to all questions as accurately as possible. All questions must be answered in order to complete this study. The study also includes quality controls designed to measure the amount of time you spend reading and answering questions. If you have any questions about this research, please contact me: Mark W. Tatge, Graduate Student, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of South Carolina at mtatge@email.sc.edu. Agreement: I have read the informed consent form and I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure. I have received a copy of this description. By clicking next, you agree to participate in the study.

Demographics

Instruct Before we get started, we would like to gather some information about you.

Dem1 Please indicate your gender

Male (1)

Female (2)

Dem2 Please indicate your employment status

Employed (full or part-time) (1)

Unemployed (2)

Student (3)

Homemaker (4)

Retired (5)

Dem3 What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Less than High School (1)

High School / GED (2)

Some College or Associates Degree (3)

4-year College Degree (4)

Masters Degree (5)

Doctoral Degree (6)

Professional Degree (JD, MD) (7)

Dem5 What is your ethnicity?

White/Caucasian (1)

African American (2)

Hispanic (3)

Asian (4)

Native American (5)

Pacific Islander (6)

Other (7)

Dem6 How old are you?

18-25 (1)

26-33 (2)

34-41 (3)

42-49 (4)

50-57 (5)

58-65 (6)

66+ (7)

Media Literacy

A2 Instructions: As we get started, I would first like to ask you a series of questions about your media consumption. Please rate how you feel about your knowledge and skills for each of the following statements.

ML1 I know how to use searching tools to get information needed in the media.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML2 I am good at catching up with the changes in the media

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML3 It is easy for me to make use of various media environments to reach information.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML4 I realize explicit and implicit media messages.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML5 I notice media content containing mobbing and violence

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML6 I understand political, economical and social dimensions of media content.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML7 I perceive different opinions and thoughts in the media.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML8 I can distinguish different functions of media (communication, entertainment, etc.).

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML9 I am able to determine whether media content contains commercial messages.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML10 I manage to classify media messages based on their producers, types, purposes and so on.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML11 I can compare news and information across different media environments

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML12 I can combine media messages with my own opinions.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML13 I consider media rating symbols to choose which media content to use.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML14 It is easy for me to make decisions about the accuracy of media messages.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML15 I am able to analyze positive and negative effects of media content on individuals.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat dgree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML16 I can evaluate media in terms of legal and ethical rules (copyright, human rights, etc.).

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML17 I can assess media in terms of credibility, reliability, objectivity and currency.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

ML18 I manage to fend myself from the risks and consequences cause by media content.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

X1 Please take 2 minutes and carefully read the product review. The next button will not appear for 60 seconds. Questions will follow.

c|net REVIEWS NEWS VIDEO HOW TO SMART HOME CARS DEALS DOWNLOAD

Plantronics' Wireless Earbuds Get Update

BY KERRY FLYNN

JAN 31, 2017

When Plantronics introduced its BackBeat GO wireless in-ear headphones last year, the company was praised for the device's lightweight design but criticized for a battery life of only 4.5 hours.

With its newer model, the BackBeat GO 2, Plantronics addressed the battery life issue by adding a travel case that doubles as a charger. The company says listening time for the earbuds is still about 4.5 hours, but a fully charged case can triple that. Users get a voice alert when the earbuds' charge is low.

The BackBeat Go 2 costs $80, and the case is another $20, which isn't bad for Bluetooth-connected earbuds. Compare this to Apple PowerBeats ($199). The new BackBeat's tuck nicely inside the case, which comes with a detachable USB charging cable. The earbuds also come with three sets of ear tips and a stabilizer to improve the fit and comfort. Plantronics also added a liquid repellent, P2i, that makes the earbuds handy for active, sweaty workouts.

The earbuds are a welcome improvement over earlier versions. The sound quality was excellent. It offered a nice midrange while capturing both high and low notes. Making phone calls was a breeze. I loved the noise cancelling feature that filters out background nose. My only issue was the buttons on the inline remote are smaller than I would like. For most, this probably won't be a drawback. Overall, Plantronics has produced an awesome product at an affordable price.

Treatment 1 No Disclosure

Y1 Please take 2 minutes and carefully read the product review. The next button will not appear for 60 seconds. Questions will follow.

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The reviewer did not receive any cash payments or free merchandise from advertisers in exchange for this review.

The earbuds are a welcome improvement over earlier versions. The sound quality was excellent. It offered a nice midrange while capturing both high and low notes. Making phone calls was a breeze. I loved the noise cancelling feature that filters out background nose. My only issue was the buttons on the inline remote are smaller than I would like. For most, this probably won't be a drawback. Overall, Plantronics has produced an awesome product at an affordable price.

Treatment 2 -No Sponsor

Z1 Please take 2 minutes and carefully read the product review. The next button will not appear for 60 seconds. Questions will follow.

c|net REVIEWS NEWS VIDEO HOW TO SMART HOME CARS DEALS DOWNLOAD

Plantronics' Wireless Earbuds Get Update

BY KERRY FLYNN

JAN 31, 2017

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Treatment 3 - Sponsored

Credibility

A3 Ins Instructions: In this section you are answering a series of questions about the product review you just read. Remember not to flip back to the message. Carefully read each question and check the most appropriate answer.

A4 Please rate how well the following adjectives describe the product review you just read.

Cr1 Accurate.

Describes Poorly (1)

(2)

(3)

(4)

(5)

(6)

Describes Very Well (7)

Cr2 Believable.

Describes Poorly (1)

(2)

(3)

(4)

(5)

(6)

Describes Very Well (7)

Authentic

Describes Poorly (1)

(2)

(3)

(4)

(5)

(6) Describes Very Well (7)

Involvement

A4 Ins In the next set of questions, we are interested in learning about how interested you are in the wireless earbuds featured in the CNET review.

Inv 1 It is important to me to know all the arguments regarding earbuds in detail.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Somewhat disagree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat agree (5)
- Agree (6)
- Strongly agree (7)

Inv2 The more information I get regarding earbuds, the better.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Somewhat disagree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat agree (5)
- Agree (6)
- Strongly agree (7)

Inv3 It is important to me to know as much as possible about earbuds.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Somewhat disagree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat agree (5)
- Agree (6)
- Strongly agree (7)

Inv4 I rarely spend much time thinking about earbuds

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Somewhat disagree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat agree (5)
- Agree (6)
- Strongly agree (7)

Inv5 I am not interested in specific information regarding earbuds.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Somewhat disagree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat agree (5)
- Agree (6)
- Strongly agree (7)

Purchase Intention

A5 Ins Please evaluate the following statements about Plantronics earbuds.

Pur1 If I need wireless earbuds, I would likely choose Plantronics earbuds.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Somewhat disagree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat agree (5)
- Agree (6)
- Strongly agree (7)

Pur2 If I had needed wireless earbuds during the past year, I would have selected Plantronics earbuds.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Somewhat disagree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat agree (5)
- Agree (6)
- Strongly agree (7)

Pur3 If I need wireless earbuds in the future, I will likely choose Plantronics earbuds .

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Somewhat disagree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat agree (5)
- Agree (6)
- Strongly agree (7)

Transparency

A6 Ins Please rate your agreement with the following statements regarding the review you just read.

Dis1 It was unclear whether the journalist was paid by an advertiser to write the product review.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Somewhat disagree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat agree (5)
- Agree (6)
- Strongly agree (7)

Dis2 The product review was clearly sponsored by an advertiser.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Somewhat disagree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat agree (5)
- Agree (6)
- Strongly agree (7)

Dis3 The product review made it obvious who sponsored this evaluation.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Somewhat disagree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat agree (5)
- Agree (6)
- Strongly agree (7)

Dis4 The product review clearly stated it was an advertisement.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Somewhat disagree (3)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Somewhat agree (5)
- Agree (6)
- Strongly agree (7)

Dis5 The product review said it was sponsored by an advertiser.

Strongly disagree (1)

Disagree (2)

Somewhat disagree (3)

Neither agree nor disagree (4)

Somewhat agree (5)

Agree (6)

Strongly agree (7)

Dis6 The product review was labeled as advertising.

Strongly disagree (1)

Disagree (2)

Somewhat disagree (3)

Neither agree nor disagree (4)

Somewhat agree (5)

Agree (6)

Strongly agree (7)

Dis7 The product review was trying to fool consumers into thinking it was not advertising.

Strongly disagree (1)

Disagree (2)

Somewhat disagree (3)

Neither agree nor disagree (4)

Somewhat agree (5)

Agree (6)

Strongly agree (7)

Dis8 The product review tried to obscure the fact that this evaluation was an ad.

Strongly disagree (1)

Disagree (2)

Somewhat disagree (3)

Neither agree nor disagree (4)

Somewhat agree (5)

Agree (6)

Strongly agree (7)

Dis9 The product review tried to deceive the viewer about the fact that it was advertising.

Strongly disagree (1)

Disagree (2)

Somewhat disagree (3)

Neither agree nor disagree (4)

Somewhat agree (5)

Agree (6)

Strongly agree (7)

Trust

A7 Ins Please evaluate the following statements about CNET reviews

Tru1 I generally trust information about a product appearing on the CNET website.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

Tru2 The CNET website is trustworthy.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

Tru3 I trust the CNET website to keep my best interests in mind. Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

Tru4 The product information described by CNET reviewers accurately reflects the quality of the product reviewed.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

Tru5 I think I can depend on products evaluated by the CNET reviewers.

Strongly disagree (1)

Somewhat disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Somewhat agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

Tru6 I would feel comfortable using a product evaluated by CNET reviewers.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

Tru7 I trust products reviewed and featured on CNET are selling at a fair price.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

Tru8 I generally trust CNET product reviews when making purchase selections.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

A8 Ins The next set of questions pertain to the product review (not the product) you read at the beginning of this study

Post Hoc

Pay1 In your opinion, what is the professional background of the reviewer?

Journalist employed by CNET (1)

Blogger or freelance journalist (2)

Consumer who purchased product (3)

Advertising professional (4)

Corporate marketer (5)

Pay2 Thinking back about the review you just read, do you recall a statement disclosing the relationship between the product advertiser and the product reviewer?

Yes, there was a statement. It disclosed the reviewer WAS paid by an advertiser. (1)

Yes, there was a statement. It disclosed the review was NOT paid by an advertiser. (2)

No, there was no disclosure statement in the review I read. (3)

Comment

Com1 Lastly, if you have any comments or questions about this research project, please let us know by using the box below.

Appendix B: IRB Approval

OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

APPROVAL LETTER for EXEMPT REVIEW

Mark Tatge

Information and Communications

Journalism & Mass Communication

800 Sumter Street

Columbia, SC 29208 USA

Re: **Pro00066364**

This is to certify that the research study, "***Assessing Disclosure of Ad Sponsored Blogs on Reader Credibility and Purchase Intention***," was reviewed in accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(**2**), the study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on **4/20/2017.** No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as

the study remains the same. However, the Principal Investigator must inform the Office of Research Compliance of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research study could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this study was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

All research related records are to be retained for at least three (3) years after termination of the study.

The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (USC IRB). If you have questions, contact Arlene McWhorter at arlenem@sc.edu or (803) 777-7095.

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Johnson
IRB Assistant Director

Appendix C: IRB Amendments

OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

EXPEDITED AMENDMENT APPROVAL LETTER

Mark Tatge

Information and Communications

Journalism & Mass Communication

800 Sumter Street

Columbia, SC 29208 USA

Study Title: *Assessing Disclosure of Ad Sponsored Reviews on Reader Credibility and Purchase Intention*

Dear Mr. Tatge:

The University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (USC IRB) approved Amendment **Ame1_Pro00066364** by **Expedited** on **6/14/2017**.

The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board. If you have questions, contact Arlene McWhorter at arlenem@sc.edu or (803) 777-7095.

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Johnson